

## **Teach For America Testimony Before the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia**

Anne Mahle, Vice President, Recruitment at Teach For America  
1992 Rio Grande Valley Corps Member

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia for the hearing titled, *Inspiring Students to Federal Service*. Teach For America is honored to help our country's Congressional leadership think through the important question of how to meet the growing need for talented individuals to serve in mission-critical positions within our federal agencies.

Teach For America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates and professionals of all academic majors and career interests who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools and become leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity.

Our mission is to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our nation's most promising future leaders in this effort. In the short run, Teach For America corps members teach in public schools in thirty-nine regions across the country. They work relentlessly to ensure that more students growing up today in our country's lowest-income communities are given the educational opportunities they deserve. In the long run, our alumni are a powerful force of leaders working from inside education and from every other sector to effect the fundamental changes needed to ensure that all children have an equal chance in life.

For twenty-one years we have sought to recruit our country's most promising young leaders to teach in low-income communities across the country and to become life-long leaders for educational equity. Each year, we seek to grow in both scale and diversity and to engage more leaders – from college/university campuses and professional sectors – in our work. Over these years, and in particular over the last five, we have learned a number of lessons that we are eager to share.

We recently wrapped up our 2011 recruitment and admissions season and we are proud to have received applications from nearly 48,000 college seniors and young professionals. These applicants come from over 1,500 colleges and universities across all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and two protectorates. As mentioned above, diversity of our corps is critical to our success. Applicants of color represented well over one-third of the total applicant pool, as did applicants from a low-income household. And representation of African Americans in our applicant pool more than tripled the representation of African Americans at our country's more selective 4-year colleges and universities.

A persistent need in the communities where we serve is in math and science education. Since Teach For America's early years we have focused a specific effort on recruiting

individuals with backgrounds in mathematics, the sciences, and engineering. In 2011, we received nearly 10,000 applications from individuals with backgrounds (i.e., majored and/or minored) in mathematics, one of the sciences, engineering, or finance. This represents just over 20% of the applicant pool and is a significant increase from 2004, when 16.5% of applicants had a background in these disciplines.

What is most encouraging to us as we seek to further diversify and grow our corps is the market share increases that we saw in the 2011 season at our country's public universities. For example: nearly 9% of the senior class at the University of Virginia applied, and more than 6% of the senior class at the following institutions applied: University of North Carolina Chapel Hill; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; University of California, Santa Barbara; University of California, Berkeley; University of Washington – Seattle; and the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Of our top twenty grossing schools, seventeen are public universities.

In 2011, we continued our history of obtaining a significant market share at a number of colleges and universities across the country. For example, 27% of Spelman College's senior class applied, as did 18% of Harvard's class, and across all of the Ivy League nearly 12% of the senior class applied. But applicants from our country's elite colleges do not comprise the bulk of our applicant pool or our corps. Indeed, 57% of our applicant pool received (or will receive) their undergraduate degree from a public university.

This fall, we will place 5,200 corps members in classrooms, the largest corps in Teach For America's history. They will join 4,100 second year teachers. These 9,300 corps members will reach 600,000 students in 43 regions across 34 states and the District of Columbia, including new sites in the Appalachia region of Kentucky, Oklahoma City, Seattle, and the Pee Dee region of South Carolina.

### **Early Recruitment Strategies**

In Teach For America's first decade, our recruitment strategies were relatively unsophisticated. We fielded a very small team of recruiters and support staff (usually between 7 and 20) who were responsible for covering large swaths of the country. We had one application deadline (in mid-February), a paper application, and one notification window in the mid- to late-spring. Our recruitment strategies relied upon word-of-mouth, limited on-campus presence, one-time, small scale on-campus events, and assistance from invested faculty and staff members on college campuses.

In 2000, we launched Teach For America's first growth plan. Through this plan we sought to double the size of our teaching corps. In order to do that we needed to start investing more significantly in our recruitment efforts and change up our on-campus presence. We did this by growing the size of our recruitment team, which enabled us to reach more campuses across the country, and increased our focus on marketing across these campuses. Towards the end of the growth plan (2003-2004) we began to explore the role that personal cultivation of top prospects might play in helping us grow our movement.

### **Evolution of On-Campus Recruitment 2005 – Present**

In 2005, Teach For America began its second growth plan in which we again sought to double the size of the corps over a five-year period, moving from placing approximately 2,000 corps members across the country to placing nearly 5,000 by 2010. Again, in order to meet this goal we expanded the recruitment team and implemented an on-campus strategy that was driven by one-on-one personal cultivation of top, diverse prospects at selective colleges and universities across the country. Over the last five years – from 2006 through 2011, we have increased our applicant pool by 150%, from 18,968 applicants in 2006 to 47,911 applicants in 2011.

Through our work we realized that it was critically important to build an understanding of three concepts among college students:

- 1) the scope of the problem – a lack of access to excellent learning opportunities is limiting the life paths of millions of children living in poverty in the United States;
- 2) that this problem is solvable – there is ample evidence that when students are given the opportunity to learn at high levels, can they excel on an absolute scale; and
- 3) that they can be part of the solution to this problem – both in the short- and long-term through participating in Teach For America.

We sought to build this understanding by executing on three key strategies: personal cultivation; awareness-building activities; and engagement of individuals in our work.

Personal cultivation has generally consisted of one-on-one and group meetings with both prospects and key influencers on campus. These key influencers are typically faculty and staff members who interface directly with student leaders and outstanding academic achievers (including but not limited to career service offices, key student advisors, college and university administrators).

Complementing our personal cultivation activities is an increased focus on awareness building on college campuses. Awareness building takes multiple forms, including: targeted marketing (both print and through social media), presentations to classrooms and student organizations, and large-scale events (e.g., information sessions and speaker series). These activities allow us to drive awareness not only with graduating seniors but also with large numbers of underclassmen, the majority of whom are already contemplating their post-college employment.

Finally, we have learned that ongoing engagement and cultivation is important. The reality is that most of the individuals who join Teach For America's corps never intended to pursue teaching. It is only through our active intervention in their post-college planning that made this a viable and attractive option. In order to help college students – particularly student leaders and those with the most post-college options – see themselves as the future leader of a classroom it is important to take them on classroom visits, to have them speak directly with current corps members and alumni

about their classrooms and experiences, and to host other activities such as alternative spring break trips in our regions. When all three of these strategies – personal cultivation, awareness building, and ongoing engagement – have been implemented well, we have seen marked growth in both corps size and diversity.

In 2008, we recognized that in order to further increase our impact on campus and create a sustainable model that would allow us to grow the size and diversity of the corps without employing hundreds of recruiters across the country, we needed to revise our heavy reliance on one-on-one personal cultivation. While reaching out to specific students is still central to our on-campus recruitment efforts, we are also employing other strategies to increase our reach while operating more efficiently. These include: group meetings with top prospects; the implementation of a robust menu of webinars that students can sign up for online; the creation of an underclassmen initiative to help us build a pipeline of interested and engaged students before their senior year; engaging our network of over 20,000 Teach For America alumni in our recruitment efforts; and continuing to build and strengthen our on-campus relationships with faculty and staff.

### Tactical Supports

In addition to these strategic choices, there are some tactical decisions that we believe have positively impacted our ability to increase the number of top, diverse college seniors and graduate students who choose to apply to our movement. They are:

- Multiple application deadlines, allowing for quick turn-around in notification of progression in the admissions process.
- Streamlined application process. For example, we ask people to submit letters of recommendation and complete an online problem solving activity only after they have moved along in the process and we eliminated an essay because data demonstrated that it didn't provide actionable information that we couldn't get through other parts of the application process.

Finally, we're often asked what lies at the root of our success. I think that the answer is simple: the hard, purposeful work of our recruitment team and the tight management that we exert around many aspects of our recruitment campaigns. At the end of the day, it's not particularly fancy or flashy, but it does make a difference. The members of the recruitment team believe deeply in our mission and in the potential of the students and families in the communities that we serve. This belief drives them and inspires them in their work, and it is through their relentless efforts on campus that we are able to engage more and more college students in our work.

### **Barriers to Growth**

Despite our success, we encounter some significant barriers to attracting the top, diverse talent on college campuses to our movement. The most common barriers that we confront across the country are:

- Top students, in particular top students of color (African American, Latino, Native American, and Native Hawaiian) as well as students with backgrounds in math, science, and engineering, have made decisions regarding their career paths very

early in their collegiate experience and may be initially closed off to joining Teach For America. Early identification and engagement with these students is critical, as is engaging them in the problem and its solvability – through visits to Teach For America regions, tutoring in corps member classrooms, and other on-campus activities to engage them in our work and provide them with leadership development opportunities.

- Many students, in particular students from low-income communities and students of color, have significant financial concerns about joining Teach For America. As the *New York Times* reported on April 11, 2011, in 2008 two-thirds of college graduates graduated with debt as compared to less than half in 1993. The average student graduates with a debt of \$24,000. Teaching in public schools, like working for the federal government, is typically not a financially lucrative career choice. Therefore, additional financial support like AmeriCorps education awards and loan forgiveness for those who choose to teach in low-income communities are important programs to help diversify the teacher workforce.

### **What We've Learned**

One of the most important truths we have learned over the last twenty-one years is that students and professionals want to serve. As they seek out their professional paths, they are looking for opportunities to positively impact their community and their country.

The mission and the impact matter. While young Americans want to serve, they do not want to serve simply for the sake of service. They want to understand that their work has a real, on-the-ground impact. They are savvy consumers who are looking for the most effective and direct ways to make an impact. It is critical, therefore, that students are presented with a compelling value proposition for public service. They need to understand what problem they are seeking to solve, how they can play a role in solving it, and have a belief that they are entering a program or a system that will embrace their talent, nurture them in their development, and help them engage deeply and meaningfully with the world around them.

The public image of public service is important. College graduates, to a remarkable degree, want to make a positive impact in their work. They also want to know that their peers, their parents, their community, and their nation consider their work to be important – and esteemed. Throughout our history, Teach For America has worked to create an understanding that: 1) excellent teaching is grounded in excellent leadership and 2) students in low-income communities are capable of high levels of academic achievement, and when challenged academically, they can excel on an absolute scale. I believe that the messages that we communicate through our recruitment efforts mark the starting point of how we shape public perception. We have primarily accomplished this by working with our recruiters (nearly all of whom are alumni of Teach For America) to help them effectively tell their stories through a variety of venues. By sharing our experiences in the classroom and the communities in which we work, we deftly illustrate the problems and challenges our corps members face. We believe that our ability to

communicate the value – and the difficulty – of our work is essential to our recruiting efforts, and it helps us attract strong applicants.

High-performing, diverse talent drives impact. Teach For America’s selectivity and diversity are central to our success.

Our selectivity is critical because the success of our program relies on the effectiveness of our teachers in the classroom and in their leadership throughout their two-year Teach For America commitment and after the corps. We recognize that our particular training and support model is not effective for all individuals who are interested in teaching. Selectivity is also important because it sends a clear message that this is hard work – that not everyone is cut out for it and that we’re truly seeking the most talented and dedicated among a generation to take this on.

Diversity is central to our success because we believe that maximizing the diversity of our organization will allow us to benefit from the talent and energy of all those who can contribute to our effort, and also to increase the opportunity for engagement in the circles of influence in our tremendously diverse society. Moreover, we seek to be diverse because we aspire to serve as a model of the fairness and equality of opportunity we envision for our nation.

At the same time that we value each individual who commits to our cause, we also place a particular focus on attracting and fostering the leadership of individuals who share the racial and/or socioeconomic backgrounds of the students underserved by public schools. In terms of race, we place the most significant focus nationally on pursuing the representation of African American and Latino individuals, given that more than 90 percent of the students we reach share these backgrounds. At the same time, we also seek to recruit Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Asian-American corps members and staff members given that we reach many students of these backgrounds in certain Teach For America regions. We emphasize racial, ethnic, and economic diversity to enhance our impact.

## **Conclusion**

Through dedication, passion, and the relentless pursuit of results, we have significantly improved the size, diversity, and quality of our corps. Yet hard work and innovative strategies do not account for all our results. A key element of Teach For America’s recruitment is the value we place on teaching, leading, and the power of transformational change in our nation’s schools and communities. Our applicants and corps members are drawn not only to challenges and opportunities of impacting the lives of children, but to the honor and prestige they associate with their work. Much like the military, joining Teach For America means joining a mission that is greater than the sum of its parts.

In order to significantly increase the quality and quantity of applicants for federal positions, I firmly believe that elected officials and their constituents must take an active role in promoting respect and appreciation for government service. Those who portray

government work as unimportant, or government workers as ineffective, diminish the prestige and appeal of the federal workforce; this creates inevitable challenges to recruitment. Those who identify federal workers as valuable and patriotic, help provide an environment to promote successful recruitment. I hope you will all take this opportunity and challenge upon yourselves.

Thank you for this opportunity and honor to share our experiences with you.