Options Open, Top Graduates Line Up to Teach to the Poor

BY TAMAR LEWIN

Lucas E. Nikkel, a Dartmouth graduate, wants to be a doctor, but for now he is teaching eighth-grade chemistry at a middle school in North Carolina, one of nearly 2,000 new members of Teach for America. "I'm looking at medical school, and everybody says taking time off first is a good idea," he said. "I think I'm like a lot of people who know they want to do something meaningful before they start their careers."

For a surprisingly large number of bright young people, Teach for America — which sends recent college graduates into poor rural and urban schools for two years for the same pay and benefits as other beginning teachers at those schools — has become the next step after graduation. It is the postcollege do-good program with buzz, drawing those who want to contribute to improving society while keeping their options open, building an ever-more impressive résumé and delaying long-term career decisions.

This year, Teach for America drew applications from 12 percent of Yale's graduates, 11 percent of Dartmouth's and 8 percent of Harvard's and Princeton's. The group also recruits for diversity, and this year got applications from 12 percent of the graduates of Spelman College, a historically black women’s college in Atlanta.

All told, a record 17,350 recent college graduates applied to Teach for America this year. After a crop last year, applications were up nearly 30 percent. Teach for America accepted about a third of this year's Ivy League applicants, and about a sixth of all applications.

Teaching does not pay much. It is not glamorous. And the qualifications of most young people going into the field are less than impressive. A

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A report by the National Council on Teacher Quality last year said that the profession attracts "a disproportionately high number of candidates from the lower end of the distribution of academic ability."

But there is Teach for America, whose members typically have top academic credentials — the average GPA is 3.5 — experience with children and determination to get results.

Teach for America officials say their recruiting success is a sign of the post-9/11 generation's commitment to public service and to improving the quality of education for low-income children. "The application numbers we're seeing reflect college students' belief that education disparities are our generation's civil rights issue," said Eliowa Clapp, Teach for America's vice president for recruitment and selection.

Many corps members talk passionately about the importance of education, and the need to close the achievement gap between white and minority students. But part of Teach for America's allure is that it is only a two-year commitment and a way to put off big life decisions, like where to live and what career to choose, decisions that people in their 20's are delaying ever later in life.

"I don't think very many of my peers know what they want to do," said Nathan Francis, who graduated from Yale last spring, was accepted to Teach for America, but declined the offer because he was unsure that he could be a good teacher for disadvantaged students after nothing more than the group's summer training. "A lot of people who just graduated are looking for things to do, so it seems very appealing to have something to do that's worthwhile and short term and gives you two more years to think about your career."

In fact, Yael Kalban, who helped organize campus recruiting as a senior at Yale last year and now teaches second grade in the Bronx, said that even a two-year commitment was daunting to many of her classmates.

"We'd tell people we thought schooling. Since 2001, the group has benefited from the same surge of interest that has brought record numbers of applications to long-established groups like the Peace Corps.

Teach for America is a growing presence in many school districts, including New York City's, which has about 800 of the group's members this year, twice as many as last year. All told, Teach for America has about 3,700 teachers — 2,100 in their first year and 1,520 in their second — teaching in 22 areas, from Los Angeles and Baltimore to the Arkansas Delta and the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota. The group only operates in regions certified as high need by the federal government and willing to employ teachers who lack certification.

As much as anything, Teach for America is a triumph of marketing. The group, based in Manhattan, recruits on more than 500 campuses and spends about a quarter of its nearly $40 million budget on recruitment and selection. The bulk of its members come from 141 top schools where it hires students, about 820 a semester, to help organize recruiting events and act as headhunters.

"It's very intensive recruiting, to meet the goals Teach for America sets for us," said Mike Kolb, who was a Harvard recruiter his junior and senior years, and teach in the South Bronx. "Some of my friends might have thought I was a little too intense my first year. There were some individuals we really wanted to go after because we thought they'd be great. It helped that the cap president, for the previous two years had joined Teach for America."

It has also helped on campus, that Teach for America now has track record. An evaluation last year by Mathematica Policy Research found that Teach for America members produce slightly higher math achievement and in worse English results than other teachers. And a June 2002 evaluation by Keen, Parsons & Associates found that 1 percent of the principals in the schools where they work regard Teach for America teachers as more effective than the overall faculty.

However, a study of Houston student achievement released this year by Linda Darling Hammond of Stanford and others found that although Teach for America teachers performed as well as other uncertified teachers, their results did not match those of certified teachers. Teach for America officials contend that the study was flawed.

While most parents don't know that their children are being taught by Teach for America members, some New York City principals say they love having Teach for America members assigned to their schools.

These days, Mr. Kalban's intensity is being poured into his American history classes.

"I'm having trouble sleeping, but I'm really enjoying it," he said. "It's frantic but fun. Classroom management is the hardest thing for me. I've learned that the minute I turn my back, it's a volcano in the classroom so I won't be turning my back anymore. There's three other TFA teachers in my school, and we're getting through it together."