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Teach for America a job-market power

Increased numbers of graduates recruited to join 2-year program

By Justin Pope

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It's the strongest job market in years for new college graduates, with salaries and perks rising accordingly.

But one of the country's hottest recruiters this spring promised low wages, exhausting labor and only a brief break before the work begins.

Teach for America is surging in popularity. At sites around the country, the 17-year-old nonprofit has begun training about 2,400 recent graduates for two-year teaching stints in disadvantaged schools, nearly triple the figure in 2000.

Applicant pool growing

Nearly 19,000 college seniors applied — and more than four in five were turned down. At Notre Dame, Spelman, Dartmouth and Yale, more than 10 percent of seniors applied.

TFA has come a long way since founder Wendy Kopp used fliers to recruit her first corps of 500 teachers, a year after outlining the idea in her 1989 Princeton senior thesis. Today she has 90 full-time recruiters. By 2010, TFA plans to expand the number of regions where it places teachers from 22 to 33, and nearly double in size. It hopes to call itself the No. 1 employer of recent college graduates in the country.

Recruiters explain realities

Driving the growth is savvy and aggressive recruiting that students say exudes competence and reminds them of Wall Street firms.

But there's also straight talk about how hard it can be to teach in low-income schools. The combination seems to appeal to high-achieving students who relish a challenge and want to be in the trenches — as long as they have help.

"It sounds like it's going to take all your energy for two years," said Lida Storch, a former University of Minnesota rower who will teach this fall at an elementary school in the Bronx. "But I just graduated from college. I've got lots of energy."

TFA recruits, trains and helps get the new teachers alternative certification, then schools pay their salaries.

The organization says it has proved the model can work.

Alumni influence policy

Now it is trying to build a critical mass of alumni who — even if they move onto other fields like law or politics — share the experience of having taught in low-income areas and may use those experiences to influence education policy.

"I told them right up front that I was going to go to med school," said recent Dartmouth graduate Kristen Wong,

who starts this fall at a new site in Hawaii. "They liked that even better. They pick people who become leaders in the community, who make policy, who vote."

Some critics note fewer than one-third stay in the classroom following their two-year stints.

But TFA says about two-thirds have remained directly involved in education — if not as teachers, then in research, policy and in many cases starting charter schools.

Kopp says more and more students are looking to do meaningful work after college, particularly if it is not a career-long commitment.

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