“Better” People, Better Teaching: The Vision of the National Teacher Corps, 1965–1968

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“What is our image going to be—conventional educators or innovators, milque-toasts or activists?” In posing this question, federal staff members responsible for developing the National Teacher Corps (NTC), a Great Society teacher reform initiative, articulated both their assumptions about and aspirations for teaching in the 1960s. According to the reformers’ thinking, existing teachers lacked the qualities of innovation, dedication, and social and political engagement required to teach students in America’s low-income communities. In response, they called for a new breed of teacher, with attributes and characteristics distinct from those of conventional educators, as well as a new approach to teacher training. The Corps’ strategy for producing this new breed of educator involved recruiting bright, liberal arts graduates to be teaching interns in underserved classrooms and engaging them in an alternative preparation that emphasized familiarizing candidates with their prospective students’ communities and the culture of poverty. In attracting “better” people and devising more effective training for the challenges of teaching in low-income schools, the Corps exploited both the zeitgeist of the times and a deeply entrenched historical critique of teachers and teacher education, seeking nothing less than the rehabilitation of the teaching profession itself.

The brainchild of liberal Senators Gaylord Nelson and Edward Kennedy, the National Teacher Corps originated in the 1965 Higher Education Act. The program operated in nearly 700 sites across the nation and underwent several radical shifts of purpose before its dissolution in 1981. This article focuses on the period between 1966


2The program fell victim to Ronald Reagan’s Education Consolidation and Improvement Act in 1981. See James J. Bosco and L. Richard Harring, “Afloat on the Sea of Ambiguity: The Teacher Corps Experience.” Education and Urban Society 15 (May 1983): 331–349. Shifts in purpose include the 1967 reauthorization, which transformed the program from a federally directed vision of reform to a more locally managed means of procuring teachers; an increased focus on attracting teachers of color that shaped recruitment strategies into the 1970s; and an emphasis on in-service development rather than recruitment of new teachers into the field as a result of a teacher surplus in the 1970s.
and 1968, when the original vision of those policymakers and the federal staffers who created the NTC initiative held sway. In their vision, the “best and brightest” (according to their criteria) could better solve the problems of educating so-called disadvantaged students than professionals conventionally prepared for the classroom. The architects of the NTC presumed that successful teaching in the most challenging classrooms required intrinsic qualities, a liberal arts education, and an understanding of the “disadvantaged.” The rest, they expected, could be learned on the job. This vision took aim both at existing teachers and traditional programs of teacher education, challenging their professionalism and, in a larger sense, casting suspicion on the notion of professional training itself.

The vision behind the National Teacher Corps offers a useful window into the broader politics of teachers and their training. Laments over the quality of teachers and teacher education have been axiomatic to the history of American education. Formal study of education has long been stigmatized as second-rate—which scholars have attributed to its association with the “women’s work” of teaching—and students in schools of education commonly thought of as “dumb.” Nor have teacher educators fared much better. As James Koerner’s 1963 study, *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, infamously asserted: “[I]t is the truth and it should be said: the inferior quality of the Education faculty is the fundamental limitation of the field.” In accordance with this scorn for traditional teacher education, prospective Teacher Corps candidates’ lack of education credentials and experience, their very alienation from the field, actually enhanced their desirability.

Complaints about teachers and their training have not only occurred regularly over time but, according to journalist Charles Silberman (whose 1970 study, *Crisis in the Classroom*, targeted teacher education) have “from the beginning, followed a single script” repeating the same arguments over generations. Bearing out Silberman’s assertion, the critique of teachers and teacher education levied by the Corps

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echoed its antecedents. Since the inception of the common school, the call for “better” people to become teachers has emerged predictably as a response to social crises, a way to increase the status of teaching, and a means of promoting one group over another. The criteria for what makes a candidate “better” have changed over time, but generally have singled out individuals of a higher social and economic standing than existing teachers and elevated notions of character over technical training. By valorizing a model of teaching as “missionary” work more related to virtue (however defined) than learned skills, the Corps also evoked the historical theme of teaching as service, further downplaying the value of professional teacher training.

The persistence of such critiques reflects a longstanding, widely shared bias against teacher training institutions and their students. Yet historians have paid little attention to these issues in the postwar era and, for the most part, have failed to recognize attacks on teachers and their preparation in this period as part of a longer continuum of ideological struggle. This struggle is significant: not only does it represent different notions about who should teach and what they should know, it also reflects important distinctions of social, economic, and cultural power between teachers and their detractors. The Teacher Corps offers an apt case study in such dynamics. Influential figures used the power of their federal platform rather than any practical knowledge about teaching to promote their view of who should teach and what teachers should know.

5For example, historian Paul Mattingly documented how, in the early nineteenth century, the American Institute for Instruction was so eager to enshrine men as teachers that it proposed investing in the training of part-time, male “citizen teachers” rather than accept the alternative of full-time, female teachers. See Paul Mattingly, *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1975). Once women gained a foothold in the profession, Catharine Beecher’s call for middle-class, native-born, educated women to become teachers again elevated a particular kind of woman as a desirable candidate. See Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976). Similar examples abound in the twentieth century. In New York City alone, for example, training and hiring practices were used to screen out undesirable candidates and attract those perceived to be more attractive on the basis of class, ethnicity, and race. See Kate Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Ruth Jacknow Markowitz, *My Daughter the Teacher: Jewish Teachers in the New York City Schools* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); and Christina Collins, “‘The Whole School-Accrediting Road’: Race, Ethnicity, and the Education of New York City Teachers, 1900–1970” (Paper presented at the History of Education Society Annual Meeting, Ottawa, Canada, 2006).

In the process, they imposed a new definition of merit that profited an already socially and economically enfranchised group.

In addition to reflecting a longstanding critique about teachers and teacher education, the founders’ vision of the NTC also casts a unique light on its historical moment, illustrating important contradictions within popular aspects of Great Society policy, such as faith in education as a solution to social problems and the growth of federal bureaucracy to protect individual rights. Familiar accounts associate the Great Society with both increased educational opportunity and the bureaucratic expansion of federal government. While those responsible for the NTC saw K-12 education as a significant leverage point for improving society, their solution, insofar as it depended on attracting a better teacher candidate, essentially negated the value of professional education and replaced it with qualifications linked to character and higher status liberal arts education. Despite lip service to the importance of education, the vision behind the Corps suggests a hierarchy, in which some forms of education were clearly considered more valuable than others, and in which personal attributes trumped professional education.

In its efforts to attract a different kind of candidate, the Corps also sought to circumvent the bureaucratic system of teacher recruitment and development in place. Their expectation that generally bright, motivated outsiders would be more effective than formally trained specialists (who might entertain loyalties to existing bureaucratic systems and habits) constitutes a renegade theme that runs through the Great Society. Great Society policy such as the Economic Opportunity Act or the Community Action Projects (CAP) harbored deep ambivalence regarding professional authority and the bureaucracies and institutions that supported it. Many liberal activists who worked in the federal government took a dim view of professionals such as teachers, social workers, and lawyers who dealt with the poor; they also distrusted the bureaucratic systems that supported and enabled these professionals. Programs that traded on this perspective,
including the Peace Corps and initiatives such as VISTA that emerged from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), served as significant models for the NTC policy. Designed to appeal to a new generation of idealistic liberal activists, such programs exhibited arguably anti-bureaucratic attitudes. Peace Corps, for instance, took pains to distinguish itself from the federal Agency of International Development (AID). As historian Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman summarized, “AID used planners; Peace Corps used people. AID went by the book; Peace Corps flew by the seat of its pants.”9 Peace Corps set the benchmark for entrepreneurialism in the face of the existing bureaucracy.

Those responsible for the NTC were determined that it too be an alternative, operating within the educational system, but as an existential “outsider,” not bound by the strictures of that system. In keeping with their suspicion of existing professionals and their bureaucracies, designers of the Corps envisioned it as a way to disrupt the status quo. As NTC Deputy Director Charles Zellers put it in a 1966 speech, “the National Teacher Corps is going to be a cocoon-shaker. It’s going to be doing unorthodox things that will draw a few gasps from old-line educators.”10 A year later, a New York Times editorial extolled the anti-bureaucratic Corps, describing “the ‘outsider’ … [as] a bearer of new ideas” that would help schools to “escape from the inbred rigidity of local and state education systems.”11 Yet as a federal program operating in schools, the Corps itself extended the federal bureaucracy. More saliently, its quest to evade existing bureaucratic systems and requirements in order to attract a better kind of educator sacrificed the very ideal of equity that the professional bureaucracy was originally meant to protect.

The vision behind the NTC thus merged fundamental tendencies of a historical critique of teachers and their training with an ironic exercise of Great Society priorities.

The result was a credo to get the “right” man (and it most often was a man) in the job. Instead of professional credentials or experience, the right man offered desirable personal qualities—in this case, character (idealistic, altruistic, and spirited), elite education, class background, and shared politics. As sociologist Jerome Karabel argues, the use of “character” and personal qualities as selection criteria suggests two implications. First, the idea of character is intangible, and can only be judged by those who possess it. Accordingly, the characteristics privileged in the recruitment of NTC interns mirrored those of many

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10Speech delivered by Charles Zellers, 29 April 1966, DHEW, Box 131, Records from the Federal Government Agencies, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
Great Society legislators and young activists. The right man, as it were, was someone like them: white, male, well educated, liberal. Second, using such qualities as selection criteria allows gatekeepers “broad discretion to admit—and to exclude—applicants on the basis of highly personal judgments,” with the result of favoring one group over others.12 The NTC founders’ faith in personal characteristics and elite, liberal arts education over the existing criteria of training, credentials, and experience ensured that people like them would benefit.

By examining the NTC recruitment, selection, and training design, this paper shows how the NTC vision redefined notions of meritocracy and undermined the validity of professional education. In this regard, the NTC fits into a much longer trajectory of critiques and innovations regarding teachers and their preparation. Though little heeded in the postwar period, this historical trajectory matters. It not only raises debate over who should teach and what they should know, but also reveals the way in which this debate has been driven by social power and privilege. By giving form to these beliefs within the particular context of the 1960s, the Teacher Corps exposes unexpected contradictions within Great Society policy: Its efforts to serve low-income students reified a hierarchy of education and circumvented existing systems, ultimately favoring an already enfranchised group and ignoring their need for pedagogical training.

Social and Educational Imperatives: The Problem

Education lay at the heart of the Great Society’s efforts to promote economic and social welfare.13 Ironically, however, just as education was

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celebrated as a potential means for breaking the cycle of poverty and confronting racism, public schools serving “disadvantaged” students came under fire as woefully inadequate. As a journalist at the time observed, by “almost every measure, the schools are still failing to provide the kind of education … the poor of every color, race, and ethnic background … need and deserve.”

While the inadequacies of such schools were legion, teachers were singled out. Depictions of so-called ghetto schools offered devastating evidence of teachers’ negative attitudes toward their students and their students’ cultures and communities. For example, in his book, To Make a Difference, Larry Cuban included the comments of a middle class Anglo teacher about her Mexican charges:

“Well, they are not very bright. Besides that they are lazy. No ambition at all … You just wouldn’t believe how these people live. They live in the worst run-down shacks and things. Some of the families live eight or ten people to a room…. There is filth everywhere. That is why the kids come to school smelly so much of the time.”

In such portrayals, teacher incompetence encompassed a multitude of perceived sins, including inferior instruction, inappropriate personal characteristics or attitudes, and poor preparation. Interestingly, censure of teachers focused as much on teachers’ character—attitudes and beliefs—as on their instructional abilities, suggesting that successful teaching of poor, minority students required a different kind of character as much as new teaching strategies. But conventional teacher training also came under fire. As one novice begged, “Please to
God, if you are going to send … [new teachers] into urban schools, prepare them a bit better than I was prepared.”

The inadequacies of these schools and the need to change them in order to meet the needs of low-income students provided the rationale for the centerpiece of Great Society education legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Essentially passed as a poverty program, the ESEA sought to strengthen educational opportunities for students from low-income families by directing significant federal aid to the schools they attended. These resources, in turn, were meant to overcome the inequalities of students’ backgrounds and thereby help schools equalize academic achievement among these different social classes. The law also provided a proverbial stick for advancing the desegregation of schools, as the Office of Education tied receipt of ESEA funds to compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in federally assisted programs).

Despite all that it established, however, the ESEA law made no provision for teachers. Given bipartisan sentiment that the “effort to do something serious about elementary and secondary education really would benefit from something for teachers,” Senators Kennedy and Nelson proposed the National Teachers Corps. As the Senators conceived it, the Corps would tackle the existing teacher problem by mobilizing youth activism and the social reform ethos of the era. They trusted that the same bright, young, idealistic liberal arts graduates that President Kennedy had exhorted to embrace community and remake the world could remake education for poor children and revitalize the teaching profession.

The 1960s stands as a high watermark of youth activism and social protest, not only in America but across the western world.

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21 Matusow, The Unraveling of America, 221; Bailey and Mosher, ESEA.
publications such as Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring* and, in the same year, Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*, as well as the moral struggle of civil rights and the escalating conflict in Vietnam. Grassroots social action—traceable in the U.S. to early counterculture rumblings of the 1950s and indebted to the long Civil Rights movement—swept the country and aroused the nation’s youth, introducing innovative tactics for social protest, new ideas about society, and a nascent form of interest group politics. Growth in the numbers of college-going young people, many from working class or ethnic backgrounds, enfranchised a new generation, while universities provided a forum for them to marshal their interest in good government, civility, and social responsibility. At the same time, government-sponsored programs, such as Peace Corps or VISTA, capitalized on students’ restiveness, altruistic inclinations, and sense of adventure. Opportunities to serve, such assignments also offered young people a chance to prove themselves in difficult but worthy endeavors. For many young people, service and social activism answered a personal quest for authenticity and meaning in their lives. Presenting the NTC as a natural heir to this culture of student movements and their programmatic equivalents, founders sought to tap the spirit, dedication, and zeal of this culture and turn it toward teaching.

**The National Teacher Corps: A Solution**

**Genesis of a Teacher Corps**

Renowned author, economist, and public intellectual John Kenneth Galbraith first issued the call for an elite corps of teachers for disadvantaged students as an anti-poverty measure in a 1964 *Harpers* magazine article. As part of a broad spectrum of initiatives, Galbraith called for better teachers:

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In the manner of the Peace Corps, but with ample pay, an elite body of teachers would be assembled—ready to serve in the most remote areas, tough enough and well-trained enough to take on the worst slums…. By this one step we would overcome the present difficulty in getting good teachers to go where they are most needed.29

In this argument, Galbraith invoked two critical aspects that came to characterize policymakers’ concept of the NTC. He fixed on the popular, glamorous image of the Peace Corps as a model for a teacher corps. And he distinguished the types of individuals—“elite,” “tough” and “well-trained”—who ought to constitute such a corps.

William Spring, the legislative aide for Senator Nelson, picked up the idea as a way to put the young Senator on the policy map. Spring’s research uncovered a program that put returning Peace Corps volunteers to work as teachers at Cardozo High School, which served disadvantaged students in Washington, D.C. If “there is any specific forerunner of the Teacher Corps,” Spring recollected, it was the Cardozo Project.30 The Cardozo Project operated on the theory that poor students of color left school because the teaching was unimaginative, the curriculum irrelevant, and the teachers unconnected to the realities of students’ lives.31 Cardozo proponents believed that good urban schools would differ from their failed counterparts in one crucial respect: a competent and committed faculty, who could relate to the disadvantaged students. The rationale of using Peace Corps volunteers registered a meaningful statement about the kind of people who might constitute such a faculty.

Relying heavily on the Cardozo model, policymakers designed the NTC to recruit liberal arts graduates to work in teams of four or five with experienced, local master teachers in school districts requesting the Corps’ service. Interns were expected to participate in a summer training session, after which they would spend two years in a site, dividing their time among a teaching apprenticeship in the classroom, volunteer activities in the community, and university coursework toward a Master’s degree in teaching. For this, interns would receive the equivalent of the beginning salary of a full-time teacher.32

30Spring, telephone interview.
32The idea of paying teachers in training is somewhat anomalous. It appeared in the Ford-funded Breakthrough Programs of the late 1950s; by the 1960s, only the ready availability of government funds made the notion of paying stipends possible. Larry Cuban, telephone interview, October 26, 2000.
The Corps’ debt to Peace Corps and OEO programs also showed up in the composition of its planning task force. Task force membership represented a range of departments—the Bureau of Higher Education, the Office of Information, and the Division of Personnel Training, for example—drawn from the Office of Education (OE) on a part-time basis. Rounding out the task force were Frank Shuler and Joe Coleman. Shuler had been a consultant to the Neighborhood Youth Corps in the Department of Labor; fresh from that OEO program, he brought his passionate belief in the importance of community action to the table. His ideas found a warm reception, and contributed to the establishment of the NTC’s unorthodox approaches to training. Joe Coleman came from the Peace Corps office, which likewise shaped his approach to the NTC. He saw the Teacher Corps as a program that, like the Peace Corps, ought to function as a “high visibility,” high priority operation in order to attract the kind of dedicated, high quality, liberal arts graduates capable of distinguishing the program. The engagement of Peace Corps and OEO-affiliated staffers, non-educators from the OE, and public relations men encouraged the task force’s embrace of a reform style dedicated to shaking things up.

Reform by Recruitment

In seeking to improve the teaching of poor children, the NTC federal staff essentially pursued reform by recruitment. Concurring with program founders that not enough good people entered teaching, Undersecretary of Health, Education and Welfare Wilbur Cohen saw the Corps as a way to attract “good people, who might not otherwise attracted to teaching, and the kind who are motivated by a spirit of service to the less fortunate.” The original Director of the NTC, Richard Graham, proclaimed, “[g]oal number one—and in my opinion a key objective of the Teacher Corps—is to attract outstanding people to teach in ghetto and rural schools.”

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34Memo, Joseph Coleman to Secretary John Gardner, 10 June 1966, DHEW, Roll 86 Microfilm, Records from Federal Government Agencies, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
35Memo, Wilbur J. Cohen to Douglass Cater, 1 July 1965, Cater: Memos to the President, May 1966, Box 34, Office Files of the White House Aides, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
According to those responsible for the NTC, “outstanding people” were distinguished by specific personal qualities and experiences. A critical characteristic of such individuals was “intelligence”: a rough calculus of elite educational attainment, personal qualities and, often, privileged family background. Reformers believed that teaching underserved children also required attributes such as warmth, insight, perception, and commitment, along with patience, energy, and “a certain hardiness of body and spirit.”\(^{37}\) Perhaps most important, both founding Senators promoted the quality of idealism as essential to teaching impoverished students. As Nelson claimed, “idealist young Americans like those who made the Peace Corps a success” would allow the NTC to “bring able and spirited teaching aid to our most disadvantaged rural and urban schools.”\(^{38}\) Conflating “idealism” with personal qualities such as youth and brightness that he saw in Peace Corps volunteers, Nelson implied that such attributes were not to be found in existing teachers or typical teacher candidates.

The characterization of good teaching in terms of idealism reflects a great deal about what these Great Society reformers believed about teachers and their work. Nelson’s interest in putting the recruitment of smart “Peace Corps types” at the heart of the initiative reveals the Great Society faith in an elite liberal arts education and the right attitude over professional training.\(^{39}\) It also suggests the appeal of eliding the existing system and introducing outsiders with new ideas and perspectives. The readiness with which both legislators discounted the skills and understandings to be achieved through conventional teacher training in favor of traits such as idealism further suggests their skepticism regarding the existence of a meaningful knowledge base associated with teaching. Finally, their celebration of idealism also shows a deeper historical tendency at work, in which service and altruism marked the worth of and qualification for teaching.


\(^{39}\)Hoffman, *All You Need Is Love*, 127, argues that “the personality characteristics of greatest interest [to the Peace Corps] were the non-intellective,” meaning volunteers’ attitudes and motivations for serving.
Indeed, the Corps’ recruiting efforts purposely challenged familiar stereotypes. In attracting socially and economically enfranchised young people who could have chosen any number of prestigious careers, the NTC meant to contradict a traditional image of teaching as low-wage women’s work pursued by those who had few options. Where teachers at the time tended to ally themselves with the status quo, the NTC was intended to appeal to liberal, reform-minded individuals. And by avoiding graduates of teachers colleges, with their purportedly low intellectual caliber, the NTC attempted to attract “intelligent” individuals—many of whom were men—with academic degrees from elite colleges and universities who had little or no teaching experience.

The “Right” Raw Material

Federal Outreach

Federal planners’ image of preferred NTC candidates emulated an ideal established by student activists or Peace Corps volunteers. Recruitment and selection served as the primary means for realizing this ideal, as federal staff cannily used these processes to ensure that the candidates accepted would reflect the attributes that they deemed desirable and not the traits ordinarily associated with teachers or students in teacher education programs. Even before President Johnson signed the legislation in 1965 establishing the NTC, the federal staff had already started to focus on recruiting strategies. They envisioned an intense national effort, complete with “every available public relations tool,” which they believed would be critical to the task of attracting the “kind of recruits we want, in sufficient numbers.” Federal staffers aimed their splashiest recruitment efforts at liberal arts graduates, especially those from elite colleges and universities, who had no education training or experience and who—without the NTC opportunity—would not have gone into teaching at all. In this way, the profile of a desirable NTC intern was purposely conceived in contradiction to essential qualifications associated with traditional teachers: training, experience, and the desire to teach.


In order to attract liberal arts graduates who hadn’t planned to teach, federal staff strove to redefine the vocation. They wondered, “How can we make the word ‘education’ swing? How can we project the impression that slum and rural workers aren’t Boy Scout types?”

Following the example of the Peace Corps, the NTC conducted “rallies, campus visits, and wide press coverage, backed up by a direct mail campaign to all university presidents, deans, placement officers and school personnel.” As the Peace Corps had shown, public relations played a key role in developing name recognition and creating an image that would attract a particular kind of individual. According to Office of Information liaison Lee Goodman, an “imaginative, effervescent program of public relations and publicity,” provided not by “career civil servants but rather top-flight PR and newsmen,” would similarly establish a profile of the Teacher Corps as bold, innovative, and spirited.

**Candidate Characteristics: The NTC Intern Profile**

In response to their efforts, the Corps received a stunning 13,000 applications for what ended up being 1,600 slots in the first cycle of NTC interns—an admirable figure, considering the scant ten-week window for recruitment. Yet a comparison of accepted and rejected applications revealed that nearly 60 percent of the applications studied had come from education majors and many applicants had actual teaching experience. Federal staff worried that the “goal of attracting primarily those who would not otherwise have gone into teaching has not so far been

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43“National Teacher Corps Task Force: Conference on Recruitment and Selection,” 1.
44“Teacher Corps—From Concept to Reality,” 580.
46Memo, Goodman to Keppel, 14 October 1965.
attained.49 Others fretted that the “caliber of Corpsmen being recruited is spotty.”50 But by exerting control over the selection process, the federal office ensured that the actual constitution of the Corps would match the image promoted by liberal policymakers and reformers. They used the selection process to “correct” for age, sex, educational success and previous poverty service experience. As a result, cohorts of Teacher Corps interns selected by the federal staff differed from existing teachers—on the basis of gender, educational background, and political beliefs—to match more closely the profile of those involved in grassroots youth movements.

**Age and Gender**

Though applicants’ ages ranged from low twenties to middle age, the interns accepted were on the whole younger, at an average age of 23.51 More females applied than males (58 percent compared to 42 percent), but the Corps accepted proportionately more men than women, to achieve close to a 50–50 balance in the first year cohort.52 By the end of the first two-year cycle of interns, that ratio had shifted to favor men, 57:43.53 These figures deviated substantially from the national percentages of male and female teachers; although increasing numbers of men were choosing to teach, they still accounted for only about 30 percent of classroom teachers nationwide.54 Of course, the potential draft deferment associated with service in the NTC provided a rationale for some male participants to join.55 Though male Corps members did not automatically qualify for exemption, the Corps made clear “that

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49 Lawrence and Austin, “National Teacher Corps,” 4.
52 Lawrence and Austin, “National Teacher Corps,” 3. The authors found that 58 percent of the applicants were women and 42 percent men. First-year figures on gender are found in “Report on the Teacher Corps, 1966–67,” 1; and Russell Cort Jr. and Ruth Ann O’Keefe, “Teacher Corps: Two Years of Progress and Plans for the Future,” (Washington, DC: Washington School of Psychiatry, 15 October, 1968), 4.
54 According to the National Education Association, *The American Public-School Teacher*, the percentage of men in classroom teaching grew about 5 percent between 1955–56 and 1965–66 (see pp. 6 and 37).
55 Oral history evidence establishes aversion to military service as a common theme among male interns. Ralph Kidder, oral history interview by author, June 30, 2003; Mike Rose, oral history interview by author, June 30, 2003; and Carl Glickman, oral history interview by author, September 28, 2005.
service in a school district and a concurrent role as an MA student will often justify deferment by a local draft board.”

At the same time, the federal office maintained a strong interest in recruiting men. Acknowledging that the program had attracted fewer male than female applicants, NTC staff researchers suggested that “[p]erhaps some special effort should be made to elicit higher quality male applicants, so that even if fewer men than women apply, a higher proportion of men will survive the selection process.” The majority of Corps members were deployed in traditionally female-dominated elementary settings, where it was believed that male interns could provide much needed male leadership. Indeed, while only 14 percent of male teachers worked in elementary education nationally, 28 percent of the Teacher Corps men taught elementary students. According to conventional wisdom of the time, many poor children lacked a positive male figure at home. The eagerness to install male interns in grade schools suggests not only the resurrection of an old fear that female teachers would feminize boys, but also anxieties about race, especially in the case of black boys, who were supposedly at risk of psychological damage from an unstable matriarchal family structure.

Race/Ethnicity

Though race would hardly have been a non-issue in a 1960s anti-poverty program, the 1964 Civil Rights Act effectively promoted an ethos of colorblind equality. As a result, neither the NTC status report of 1966 nor the in-house report issued in June of 1967 included information on the race or ethnicity of first cycle interns. The evidence that does exist is

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57 Lawrence and Austin, “National Teacher Corps,” 5.
58 “Report on the Teacher Corps, 1966–67,” 1, found 70 percent of the Corps focused on elementary education in its first year of operation; both that source (same page) and Cort and O’Keefe, in “Teacher Corps,” 21, addressed Corps placement of men in elementary classrooms to provide positive male identification.
muddled. Depending on the source consulted, racial and ethnic minorities constituted somewhere between 10 and 30 percent of the Corps across the program’s first three cycles, or about 1.5 to 4 times the national average at the time.\(^{62}\)

Much as the Peace Corps focused on recruiting “qualified Americans,” without explicitly considering race as a criterion, the NTC recruitment targeted Senator Nelson’s “able, idealistic Americans” and selected its interns according to “basic eligibility requirements” and “suitability.”\(^{63}\) Yet as historian Jonathan Zimmerman asserts, the Peace Corps actually operated according to a tacit agenda as well, which accorded African American volunteers special consideration.\(^{64}\) Some evidence implies a similar mission among the federal NTC staff. For example, the fact that several historically black colleges and universities, such as Xavier, Hampton Institute, and Prairie View A & M, for example, were selected as training sites suggests interest at the federal level in including African Americans. And Ronald Corwin’s 1973 study of the NTC indicates that the Corps’ strategy of attracting new types of people included recruiting minorities into teaching.\(^{65}\) Notably, as authority over intern selection moved from federal to local sources after the 1967 reauthorization, this focus intensified, and the percentage of minority interns increased sharply, as several local program sites made “determined efforts” to recruit black interns.\(^{66}\) As a result, more than half of the 5th and 6th cycle interns were from minority populations, including African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans.\(^{67}\) By 1975, in tandem with larger cultural changes, the authors of a ten-year retrospective report could acknowledge that:

\(^{62}\) Cort and O’Keefe, in “Teacher Corps,” 4, 21, place minority involvement in the first cycle at 30 percent at the outset of the cycle, 23 percent at the end. Corwin, Reform and Organizational Survival, discusses on p. 41 a “respondent sample” of second and third cycle interns, of whom 16 percent were minority; on p. 83, he estimates that his study sample contained 10 percent minorities. The National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, “Teacher Corps: Past or Prologue?” (Washington, DC: National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, July 1975), ERIC ED 109083 features the percentages of minority Corps members over ten years. For national average, see “Facts on U.S. Teachers from the Census,” School Life 49 (August, 1964): 4. For the percentage of minority teachers with whom the Corps worked in schools, see Corwin, 41.


\(^{64}\) Zimmerman, “Beyond Double Consciousness,” 1004.

\(^{65}\) For example, see Corwin, Reform and Organizational Survival, 70.

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{67}\) National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, “Teacher Corps,” 12, 34. Corwin claims that even by the fourth cycle, minorities constituted over half of the Corps membership. See Corwin, Reform and Organizational Survival, 83.
Reference is now given to those candidates whose backgrounds are similar to the target group on the theory that this may result in heightened understanding and dedication on the part of the interns in delivering educational services to the similarly disadvantaged children.\textsuperscript{68}

Within the original vision, however, minorities would seem to have had little place, given the focus on educating interns about non-white races, communities, and the culture of poverty. A majority of NTC interns were white, then, not because race operated as an explicit criterion, but because the qualities the federal staff prized and the goals of the program targeted a group much likelier to be white than of color. Even if reformers wished to include minority candidates, their particular definition of merit made it improbable that they would attract or select candidates of color.

Background Characteristics and Political Orientation

A majority of interns came from middle- to upper middle-class families. Aggregate evidence suggests that nearly 60 percent of second and third cycle interns grew up in professional or managerial homes; another 18 percent had fathers who worked in technical, sales, or skilled clerical fields.\textsuperscript{69} This put NTC interns into the same socioeconomic category as many of the federal reformers and student activists, but also that of most teachers as well. As historian John Rury claims, most teachers at mid-century were drawn from the ranks of middle-class Americans; indeed, by this point, teaching itself was a “solidly middle-class profession,” which allowed for “status maintenance for many in the middle class and a small degree of social mobility” for those in the working class.\textsuperscript{70} Class background, it seems, offered common ground between teachers and Corps members.

Despite common race and social class backgrounds, however, where teachers had long been derided for intellectual frailty, NTC founders expected the interns to present an academically talented alternative. The founders measured intelligence largely in terms of interns’ educational background. Nearly three quarters of the first cycle interns had earned their bachelor’s degrees in liberal arts and social

\textsuperscript{68} National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development, “Teacher Corps,” 34.

\textsuperscript{69} The same evidence shows that nearly a quarter of the interns came from households where the father worked as a laborer or unskilled service worker. Corwin, \textit{Reform and Organizational Survival}, 83.

science disciplines; another 14 percent earned their degrees in mathematics, business or engineering.71 Less than 15 percent of those selected had education majors.72 A majority of the first cycle cohort had maintained a grade point average of at least 3.0 in college, but more importantly, many had attended prestigious institutions of higher education, including Harvard, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan.73 The liberal arts education most interns received, often at elite institutions, functioned as a key status distinction between them and existing teachers. In spite of strong federal support for education in general, the vision behind the NTC suggests unspoken but crucial assumptions about what kind of education mattered.

The NTC also succeeded in attracting candidates who differed from conventional teachers in their political orientation. On a scale designed to measure social and political liberalism, researchers found that second and third cycle interns “ranked disproportionately high” compared with existing teachers, new teachers, and even other graduate students.74 Interns’ political liberalism was evident in their attitudes and dispositions. For example, nearly half of the interns approved of desegregating schools, compared with little more than a quarter of the experienced teachers.75 Their reputation as politically liberal activists even drew the attention of the FBI, which recommended a rigorous screening process to filter out possible “subversive groups.”76 This political liberalism contrasted starkly with the values of veteran teachers and teachers in training at the time, who, as sociologist Dan Lortie argued, were predisposed to conservatism.77 Studies at the time established education students as among the least liberal of those attending universities and colleges; other research, comparing teacher trainees with liberal arts students, found prospective teachers to have “conservative attitudes toward politics and civil liberties.”78

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72Ibid.
74Corwin, *Reform and Organizational Survival*, 89. Corwin points out that in the dispersion of interns across local programs, the proportion of liberal interns could vary widely, so that two-thirds of the interns in one local program were classified as highly liberal while in another program, as few as 11% might be so classified. This obviously affected the idiosyncratic character of local programs.
77On teachers’ tendency toward conservatism, see Lortie, *School Teacher*, chapter two.
78See William Crotty, “Democratic Consensual Norms and the College Student.” *Sociology of Education* 40 (Summer 1967): 200–218; and Carl Bereiter and Marvin
Their education and political attitudes significantly distinguished a majority of Corps members from existing teachers. Indeed, while their socioeconomic backgrounds more closely matched those of teachers than those of the children they taught, most interns nevertheless chose to identify with their student community rather than with teachers. In at least one case, they made that preference clear by crossing striking AFT teachers’ picket lines. By identifying themselves with the poor children they taught, interns aligned with marginalized outsiders, rather than with the class and bureaucratic system to which the relatively more powerful teachers belonged. Their predilection matched tendencies at the time for disaffected young people to repudiate established authority, particularly in the form of institutionalized bureaucracies, and ally themselves with the authenticity of the disenfranchised. In this, they also exhibited that strain of Great Society liberalism that condemned bureaucratic institutions (i.e., schools) for their oppressive nature as well as the professionals who staffed them.

A New and Different Training

The federal staff’s attempts to shun education majors and applicants from teachers colleges in the selection process in favor of liberal arts majors spoke volumes about their estimation of teacher training institutions and teacher educators. To provide interns with the relevant skills and knowledge they would need to work with disadvantaged students, the reformers believed that a new kind of preparation was in order. As argued, teacher education in general had long suffered criticism at the hands of scholars, foundations, and even teachers themselves. In


Matusow, The Unraveling of America, 244–45. See also Corwin, Reform and Organizational Survival, pp. 22–24; and Ronald Corwin, A Sociology of Education (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965).

The best known of such critiques include Arthur Bestor, Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985); Conant, The Education of American Teachers; and Koerner, The Miseducation of American Teachers. Teacher education has provided a nearly constant project for foundations. See, for instance, William S. Learned, William C. Bagley, and Charles A. McMurray, George D. Strayer, Walter F. Dearborn, Isaac L. Kandel, Homer W. Josselyn, The Professional Preparation of Teachers for American Public Schools. A Study Based upon an
the 1960s, this critique acquired a twist: the idea that teachers of disadvantaged students required specialized training gained currency among reformers and some teacher educators alike. As Kenneth Clark’s study of Harlem in 1965 concluded, “the problems of identifying with children of different backgrounds—especially for persons from the white middle class … are multiple … [and c]ourses in educational philosophy and psychology as presently taught do not prepare these teachers for the challenge of their job.”83 Specialized training would differ from conventional training in its aims to sensitize teacher candidates to the culture of poverty and to the communities of their disadvantaged students; help them to develop new courses, special instructional methods, and curricular materials designed to meet the needs of underserved children; and introduce prospective teachers to “slum schools” for their practice teaching.84 Such training not only presumed that traditional pedagogical courses had little value, but also that the ideal teacher candidates would be strangers to those communities and need such an introduction.

Despite the reformers’ disdain for conventional teacher education, NTC training took place in nearly 50 different universities that also ran traditional teacher education programs. Originally, the involvement of universities in training and the award of a Masters degree were deemed necessary to distinguish the Corps from other federally sponsored programs such as VISTA.85 Delegating training to the institutions responsible for the very teacher education the Corps was meant to improve upon, however, seems ironic, though some progressive teacher educators welcomed the Corps as a vehicle for rethinking teacher education generally. For example, professor of education Donald Sharpe (who became director of the Indiana Teacher Corps) saw the

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85As Director of OEO, Sargent Shriver testified that the NTC threatened to duplicate and undermine the efforts of his VISTA program; he suggested attaching the NTC to professional training and a credential. See Senate Subcommittee, *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, 2984–85.
Corps as “possibly the most radical experiment in teacher education ever tried,” which could “teach the profession a lot.”

Across the 50 university sites, the NTC program design revealed its philosophy about what knowledge was most important for teachers of underserved students. The Corps’ “tri-partite model”—equal parts teaching practice in classrooms serving poor students of color, deep acquaintance with the students’ families and community through volunteer activities, and university coursework toward a Masters degree in teaching—highlighted the key thrusts of the program. Corps members were exposed immediately to the classrooms and communities of low-income students, giving them an important practical context for their coursework. Their coursework tended toward disciplinary classes, such as Indiana University’s “Psychology of the Disadvantaged,” designed to cultivate interns’ understanding of their students and the culture of poverty. Together, such preparatory elements presumed that familiarizing Teacher Corps candidates with communities they would serve was a primary goal of teacher education.

In advocating the engagement of potential teachers in the communities they would serve and the immediate apprenticeship of novices in classrooms, the Corps’ vision of preparation attacked the gap between university coursework and the realities of teaching in schools serving low-income students. As such, the NTC not only challenged established principles and practices of teacher education, but of the teaching profession itself. In the wake of urban riots that began in Watts in 1965 and still gripped low-income neighborhoods, many middle-class teachers found themselves increasingly estranged from the communities where they taught.

While components of the NTC model departed from and made important contributions to traditional teacher education of the time, they did not necessarily represent new ideas. They derived from a long history of teacher education improvement efforts, including James Conant’s MAT model of the 1930s and the Ford Foundation “Breakthrough” experiments of the 1950s, for example, that meant to respond to persistent criticisms of teacher preparation. Attempts to

88 On Conant’s MAT model, see Arthur Powell, The Uncertain Profession: Harvard and the Search for Educational Authority (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); regarding the Ford programs, see Stone, Breakthrough in Teacher Education, 10, 8 and Woodring, New Directions for Teacher Education.
shore up the liberal arts background of teacher candidates and situate the teaching of pedagogy in classroom practice, these innovations shared a common belief in the importance of a rigorous, undergraduate liberal arts education as well as common skepticism toward university-based pedagogical training, professors of education, and a pedagogical knowledge base other than what could be learned through experience. More concretely, these innovations featured the model of a four-year liberal arts course of study followed by a fifth year of professional coursework, the importance of internships, closer university-school partnerships, and the participation of liberal arts faculty in teacher training.89 The focus on specialized training for teachers of disadvantaged students—such as the deployment of student teachers in schools that served poor children and the use of disciplinary courses such as anthropology or sociology, to develop new teachers’ appreciation of different cultures—drew on ideas popular in the 1960s.90 In these ways, the Corps bore out a historical tradition of teacher education innovation, but updated it with notions about what teachers needed to know to teach disadvantaged students. This hybrid preparation served as the final capstone to their program for redefining the profession, its constituents, and its work.

Confrontations and Contradictions

Federal reformers responsible for the NTC recruited candidates closely modeled on the profile of those who joined student movements or the Peace Corps. Their ideal privileged characteristics of youth, masculinity, whiteness, affluence, elite liberal arts education, and political liberalism. They expected these new candidates, on the strength of such qualities and their specialized training, to upgrade the teaching profession and improve the quality of education received by underserved students. Yet this vision was short-lived. The 1967 reauthorization effectively squelched it by shifting the prerogative of selection from the federal staff to local sites and halving the funds requested for the program.

The denouement of the federal vision was a function of politics and professional backlash. By evading the existing system in order to


federally select and deploy interns, the NTC was perceived by opponents as having arrogated local and professional authority. The conflict between federal and local authority played out in partisan terms, as Republicans revolted against the Democratic excesses of Johnson’s Great Society. In accordance with Congressional Republicans’ opposition to “an elite guard of Federal teachers,” the 1967 reauthorization made the program more consistent with Republican views, by removing the “wide discretionary powers in the U.S. Office of Education as proposed by the Johnson administration.” Once the legislative changes took effect and local recruiting began in earnest, interns on the whole were, in fact, less likely to fit the federal reformers’ vision.

Doing away with the reformers’ vision was not solely a Republican affair; however; nor did it represent simply a conflict between federal and local interests. It also involved the reassertion of professional prerogatives, by way of a powerful Democratic Representative from Oregon named Edith Green. Green herself was teacher for many years before becoming a Congresswoman. As a former teacher, she rejected the award of teaching slots on the basis of background and personality rather than learned skills and experience. And she made no secret of her objection to bringing “untrained and unqualified people into the teaching profession” and offering benefits—in the form of tuition-free graduate study—that seemed unfair from the perspective of traditionally trained teachers.

Unlike other teachers, however, Green had a powerful platform. As head of a Special Education Subcommittee, and second-ranking member of the full Committee, she possessed authority to act on her professional beliefs. Allying with a coalition of states-rights Republicans (newly strengthened by the loss of 47 Democratic House seats in the 1966 elections) Green

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94For data on existing teachers’ reactions to the Corps members as they worked in their schools, see Roy Edelfelt, Ronald C. Corwin, and Elizabeth Hanna, Lessons from the National Teacher Corps (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1974), 30; Bernard C. Watson, “The Taming of a Reform,” Phi Delta Kappan 50 (October, 1968): 99–104; and Kiser, “Explorations in Organizational Change.”
made her disapproval known by helping to engineer the 1967 reauthorization that undercut the federal vision.\(^9\)

In addition to its enemies, however, the federal vision bore the seeds of its own destruction. Like many teachers, Green understood teaching as a vocation that required professional education, but that also provided opportunity to all who could demonstrate their proficiency on that basis. In substituting their own criteria (largely reliant on personal characteristics) for professional preparation and experience, the NTC reformers substituted a new definition of merit for that proficiency and ignored the need for pedagogical knowledge. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with efforts to attract the best people into teaching, but the endeavor turns on the definition of “best.” What characteristics mark the best? And who should determine them? Perhaps not intentionally discriminatory, the qualities that NTC reformers considered meritorious translated into race, class, and gender biases that, along with their anti-bureaucratic approach, rewarded white, well-educated, middle-class men. At a moment of extraordinary backlash against privilege of all sorts, and as part of an effort to address inequality in schools, the NTC vision strikes a decidedly incongruous note.

The attributes prized by the NTC vision also seemed to blind reformers to the need for a strong pedagogical preparation. Indeed, the very concept of the NTC depended upon the idea that “reasonably intelligent, mature, concerned men and women, though lacking the requisite pedagogical courses, can cross the gulf between layman and professional teacher in one year.”\(^9\) The insistence on educating interns about the communities and cultures of their students denotes an important, often overlooked aspect of what teachers need to know. Yet the gap between the altruistic, activist sensibility that reformers courted and the demands of teaching in underserved public schools may have been too great for many to cross without greater pedagogical training, which might have helped interns to channel their reform energies more effectively in the classroom. Oral history evidence reveals interns’ desire for “more about ‘here’s how you actually teach reading,’” for example.\(^9\)

As these interns recalled, coursework typically did not involve much method, but focused instead on the child in the context of family and community. In general, the lack of teaching preparation laid a heavy

\(^{95}\)See Mason Drukman, *Wayne Morse: A Political Biography* (Portland, OR: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1997), 394–95, for Green’s role in challenging the National Teacher Corps reauthorization.


\(^{97}\)Anne Doerr, oral history interview by author, November 30, 2005.
burden on all interns. As one observed, “[T]hose who couldn’t understand *what it means to teach* … didn’t last very long.” Indeed, nearly 60 percent of the recruits who began with this intern in Kentucky had “washed out” of pre-service training.98 This may reflect on the bureaucratic nature of schools, but it also suggests that, in addition to understanding the context of their students, interns would have benefited as well from a deeper understanding of schools and the pedagogical work of teaching.

The NTC exposes important power dynamics behind a persistent and deeply rooted historical critique of teachers and their preparation. It also reveals some surprising incongruities of Great Society policy, in its anti-bureaucratic, outside-of-the-system ethos and dismissal of professional education. At the same time, the NTC speaks to contemporary efforts to recruit and train teachers for underserved classrooms, especially given the burgeoning popularity of so-called alternate route programs. Programs such as Teach for America have wooed privileged candidates and chipped away at conventionally structured university preparation, especially pedagogical coursework. University programs are hardly inviolable, but they and the teacher educators who run them possess strengths and relevant experience that are rarely taken into account by outsiders unfamiliar with the work of teaching. Though the success of alternate route programs in preparing teachers for low-income communities remains hotly contested, they clearly reveal similar assumptions to those that shaped the original vision of the National Teacher Corps.99 Today, many well-intentioned efforts to reform the recruitment and preparation of teachers rely on the presumptions of powerful individuals far from the realities of teaching, which perpetuate privileged notions of what makes a good teacher; most also deprecate pedagogical preparation. And in these regards, the attempts of the NTC and its brethren to meet the needs of educationally disenfranchised students betray their own responsibility to create a just and equitable society.
