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Point of View: In a Perfect World

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In a Perfect World

BY CHRISTINA FENG '08

Student A: "You really asked a CEO to come speak to us?"

Me: "Well, I know he's very busy, so I offered to Skype between his office and our classroom, if necessary."

Student B: "Ms. Feng. We don't have Skype in here."

Me: "No problem, we'll install it. Worst case, I'll use my cell on speaker."

Student B: "Aren't you nervous we might embarrass you?"

Me: "What's there to be embarrassed about?"

Student A: "He's a CEO, miss!"

Me: "I know. That's why I reached out to him. What better person to come and speak to you all about business?"

Student A: "So you really think he'll come?"

My guilty pleasure: I love playing the "perfect world" game. I play on the train to work, waiting on line at the store, zoning out at the gym. The rules are simple: What could I make happen if I lived in a perfect world? And that's how I got my classroom of low-income, at-risk high school seniors to engage in the world of finance.

My curriculum of business, government, and economics tied neatly into my own studies at Colby. I had my students run mock firms, delve into business case studies, research consumer needs, dissect bill proposals. I often channeled my favorite Colby professor, asking, "What would Professor [Cal] Mackenzie do?" (Stay calm. Handle with grace. Be prepared.)

I also constantly remind myself of an insight from my first year of teaching: Students crave success. And, when given attention, respect, and opportunity, students will do anything to try to meet high expectations. This year was no different. As long as my students saw me working hard, they reciprocated. Sure, there were many things my students should have learned prior to senior year but did not. So I caught them up. By taking time to address their deficiencies, I was giving them more confidence and strengthening their capabilities.

I was also brutally honest when I had to be. Sometimes they would groan. I assigned too much work, the content was too challenging, other classes had free time and no homework. My response was always the same.

"Sure, I could let you have a break, though I bet you won't remember a break five years from now. But maybe, just maybe, something I teach you now will resonate later. Maybe it will help on a job interview, in a conversation at a work event. Maybe it'll just help you better understand the world around you. Yes, this is difficult material, but I know each and every one of you can handle it. I wouldn't be standing here if I didn't believe in you."

My mini rant would be greeted by silence and the occasional smart-alecky comment under the breath. But the work always got done—and done well.

Yet, toward the end of the year, I sensed something was a little off.

Comments showed that my students, while busy going over business plans and annual reports, could not see themselves in the world of business. It hit me that my students did not grow up with parents chatting about the Dow. The *New York Times* was not delivered to their door. Rather, most of the people on Wall Street looked, dressed, and talked very differently than the people in my students' lives. So, although my students were invested in and felt good about mastering difficult concepts (I'd bring problems from my sister's economics book and, after completion, proudly announce that they had just done the work of a Columbia undergrad), they didn't fully feel connected to what we were doing.

My reaction? In a perfect world my students would feel the world of finance within reach.

In hindsight, I may have been too idealistic, maybe even downright presumptuous. Who was I to e-mail Robert E. Diamond Jr. '73, CEO of Barclays, and request time out of his hectic schedule? But my own naïveté didn't become apparent to me until later. I just wanted to prove to my students that they deserved the attention of talented and successful people.

That's the way I work. It's also the Teach for America way.

Since the inception of Teach for America, 20 years ago, there has been much commotion about short-term and long-term implications of the organization, which recruits top college graduates to commit to two years of teaching in low-income communities. Critics say TFA undervalues a respected profession. Few TFA corps members are education majors, yet they are assigned to under-resourced classrooms with overwhelmingly lagging and often challenging and/or disturbed students. TFA corps members, primed with undergraduate degrees in public policy, economics, chemistry, and myriad other majors, enter the classroom after a mere five weeks of training. Each corps member's total teaching experience amounts to approximately two days of teaching. So it is no surprise that skeptics question how the TFA model can lead to success.

Teach For America works because it recruits staff and corps members who play the perfect-world game, too. TFA operates under the prevailing ideology that our nation's achievement gap is so pervasive that we need our nation's most ambitious, relentless, disciplined individuals to combat educational inequity. As a result, Teach For America casts a wide net, seeking the double-major student-body president, the politically active investment-banking analyst, the premedical student who is captain of the swim team. Ninety-six percent of TFA corps members have demonstrated leadership, whether as captain, club leader, nonprofit founder, project coordinator, or tutor. A successful teacher needs skills in critical thinking, communication, innovation, and analysis. They may be new to the classroom, but members bring these skills to schools.

Yet this is only part of the overarching goal of Teach For America:



that one day all children will have the opportunity to receive an excellent education. While roughly 60 percent of corps members continue in education after their two-year commitments, others leave the field changed. They become a crucial component in TFA's fight against the achievement gap. TFA veterans permeate business, medicine, politics, law, nonprofit, and public policy. Though no longer in education directly, members carry their experiences with them, expanding Teach For America's network and reach.

These high-minded goals don't keep me from having days when I feel defeated. I don't have enough resources in my classroom. I wasn't clear explaining hedge funds. A colleague makes a snide comment that when TFA corps members work late it makes everyone else look bad. A fight breaks out in the hallway during a lesson. The projector isn't working.

My antidote? The perfect-world game. I write grant proposals (six for six so far!). I brainstorm with a friend about how to teach the content more effectively. I gently remind my colleague that we're all in this for the students. I call security and continue teaching despite the fight. I forgo the PowerPoint for a lively class discussion.

With honest self-scrutiny, I forgive myself every night for the imperfections. I wake up each morning and continue to plan for the perfect world, "where all children will have an equal opportunity for an excellent education."

And sometimes it seems like the perfect world is actually here.

In May Mr. Diamond did visit our classroom. He spoke about his childhood and his family's dedication to education. He described the culture at Barclays. He talked about the implications of financial regulations and the importance of simply doing the right thing, taking the moral route. He spoke of our increasingly globalized world and the power of

higher education. My students sat up straighter, heads high, absorbing all he was sharing.

And after he left they could not stop talking about how down-to-earth this star of investment banking was, how he answered each of their questions thoughtfully. "We could tell he was really thinking about his answers, miss!" Every one of my students felt validated. One of my favorite comments came from a student with a particularly difficult background, one who does not have many opportunities to feel successful. He beamed. "I understood everything he was talking about!"

And then Mr. Diamond invited my students to visit Barclays in midtown Manhattan. Meeting with people from investment banking, capital markets, and campus recruiting? Suspicious, one of my best students asked, "Won't the people on the trading floor be annoyed having a bunch of students walk around there?"

It was clear that my students felt a lot more comfortable with Mr. Diamond on their own turf; 745 Seventh Avenue was alien territory. But then I heard it. "We're good enough for Mr. Diamond, so we'll be good enough for everyone in that building. When are the permissions slips due, Ms. Feng?"

Two weeks later we found ourselves in the Barclays lobby. While we were hoping to see Mr. Diamond again, we understood that an executive's schedule is hectic. So imagine our surprise when Mr. Diamond arranged for us to visit him in his office as the first stop. This time, without hesitation, my students marched in, owning the experience. They finally accepted the fact that they are worth it. It was a perfect end to the school year. In the perfect-world game, it was a true win.

Christina Feng '08, a Teach for America corps member, teaches at the High School of Arts and Technology in New York City.

Colby in Teach For America Top 10

Teach For America was in the news this summer for its increasing selectivity as well as for TFA's list of "top contributors"—the colleges and universities with the most graduates accepted this year—Colby included.

Competition to enter TFA was so selective in 2010 (4,500 new members chosen from 46,000 applicants, according to the organization) that the *New York Times* covered the trend in July. Columnist Michael Winerip cited a Villanova grad who didn't get a TFA slot and took a Fulbright Fellowship instead, someone who had to "settle" for the University of Virginia Law School, and a Harvard grad who saw four classmates rejected for each one accepted.

In TFA's own list of top contributing colleges and universities, released in July, Colby tied for ninth among schools with enrollments under 3,000. Colby had 11 new corps members accepted this year.