

The Problem of Solo Civic Engagement:

An Interview with Doug McAdam

by Cynthia Gibson, Ph.D.

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TEACH FOR AMERICA (TFA), A PROGRAM THAT enlists recent college graduates in urban areas, has asserted that its value proposition goes beyond its immediate benefits to schools and students in that its participants, the teachers who emerge from the program, are likely to be more civically engaged than average. TFA leader Wendy Kopp has likened the program's outcomes to those of Freedom Summer. Stanford professor Doug McAdam, the recent recipient of Tufts University's Tisch Civic Engagement Research Prize, wrote a book on the Freedom Summer participants. He studied the TFA question at the invitation of Kopp, and his findings have now become a source of controversy. Here Cynthia Gibson, an expert on civic engagement, interviews McAdam to see what the fuss is about.

Cynthia Gibson: *The TFA study has generated some lively discussion among those who are impressed with its rigor and breadth and*

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"I was skeptical that there would be big enduring effects for the [Teach for America] graduates."

—Doug McAdam

Teach for America (TFA) places recent college graduates, many from elite universities, as teachers in some of the nation's neediest and sometimes least well-performing school systems. The young TFA teachers receive some training before placement, but unlike traditional public-school teachers, they lack teacher certification.

Now two decades old, TFA has placed approximately 24,000 recruits in classrooms, including more than 7,000 currently participating as Teach for America corps members. As one of the nation's most widely recognized socially entrepreneurial nonprofits, TFA has received extensive grant support from a cross-section of foundations and significant government funding through the Department of Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and other agencies. Accustomed to receiving "set asides" or earmarks in the federal budget, TFA now faces a change as the Obama administration's Department of Education has recommended elimination of TFA's \$18 million earmark in the FY 2011 federal budget, a move that TFA says may jeopardize the organization's growth.

those who have concerns about its conclusions. Then there are some in between who believe that service and service learning have long-term civic outcomes but want more solid data to affirm that. I would call them hopeful skeptics, perhaps.

Doug McAdam: I think that actually describes nicely where I'm at. I don't doubt that some forms of youth service or youth activism have longer-term civic impacts, but I'm also convinced that you can't assume those impacts.

CG: *So let's start with what interested you in pursuing this particular study.*

DM: Well, I'm a political sociologist who has mostly studied social movements and other forms of nonroutine politics, and the focus of that work has been either at the meso level looking at social-movement organizations or looking at

the most macro level: under what conditions do movements emerge? How do they develop over time? What impacts, if any, do they have? And so on. So, with one notable exception, I haven't been looking at individual-level data on the enduring effects of youth service or youth activism. I did a study 25 years ago where I looked at the biographical trajectories of all those who applied to take part in something that, at the time, was called the Mississippi Summer Project but which has come to be known as "Freedom Summer." And I stumbled upon the original applications from that project. I realized as I was looking through these applications that I had the applications not only for those who applied, were accepted, and went to Mississippi, but also a large number of applications for people who applied, were accepted, and for whatever reason didn't go.

So I had this wonderful naturalistic experiment dropped in my lap. You have two groups that look similar on the eve of the summer. One has the experience of Mississippi; the other does not. Simple question: what difference, if any, did Freedom Summer make in their subsequent lives? And the answer was it made a huge difference. The biographies went in very different directions, largely, I would say, as a result of what they did or didn't experience in Mississippi.

The work I did on Freedom Summer is also where the TFA started. In 1998 or '99, Wendy Kopp [of Teach for America] called me and said, "Our 10-year anniversary is coming up. I just read *Freedom Summer* [by Doug McAdam]. I'm convinced that what you showed for the Freedom Summer volunteers is what happens for our alumni on a more regular basis, and I'd be interested in your doing a study of that."

With funding from [the William] T. Grant Foundation, I conducted the study, which looked at three groups of applicants. Wendy was most interested in the impact on graduates: that is, people who are offered positions, take them, and fulfill their two-year teaching commitment. We were equally interested in two control groups: "drop-outs," or those who began the program but left sometime before completing the two years, and "nonmatriculants," those who were accepted by TFA but declined the offer.

When I took the study on, I was skeptical that there would be big enduring effects for the graduates, largely because TFA is not like Freedom Summer. I never regarded Freedom Summer as a typical youth-service experience at all because it was much more intense, much more collective, much more explicitly political, and it also took place at a particularly pregnant moment in U.S. history: the summer of 1964, just as the '60s wave was starting to build. So I assumed a lot of what happened to those who went to Mississippi was a function of what happened immediately afterward—not just about what happened that summer.

There are other significant differences as well. Compared to Freedom Summer, TFA is much less explicitly political. Freedom Summer was also a very collective—intensely communal—experience, whereas TFA is a more solitary service experience. Finally, there are huge selection effects in TFA. That is, the most service-oriented, graduating seniors apply to TFA, and then TFA gets to select the most active of the most active. So I expected there would be small or minimal differences between the three groups, and I was really intrigued as a social scientist to see if in fact that was true.

CG: *What did you find?*

DM: We looked at six or seven measures of subsequent service—civic and political activity—and found that pretty consistently, TFA graduates lagged behind the nonmatriculants, who were consistently more active on all subsequent dimensions of civic participation, service, politics, etc. The contrast between the dropouts and the graduates was less clear. In general, the dropouts ranked slightly higher on some dimensions of subsequent service, but the differences weren't that great or as consistent as the differences between nonmatriculants and graduates.

I should say, parenthetically, that all three groups are wildly active. They would outpace their age peers by a factor of three or four. So these continue to be very civically engaged folk, and that has to be made clear. But it's the differences between the groups that were intriguing and

somewhat surprising even to me. As I said, I was not expecting to see big differences favoring the TFA graduates, but I certainly wasn't expecting to see that they would lag behind nonmatriculants.

CG: *Your points about all three groups being very civically active is one that others have made to highlight the importance of this level of civic engagement, even among a cohort that may not include the entire youth population. That is, isn't it good to see that some programs attract young people interested in being engaged and that support that engagement?*

DM: Absolutely. I think these programs are terrific, and I think TFA is terrific, especially in the educational service it provides. But that's not the issue here. The question in this case goes beyond the educational service to a second claim made by the organization. TFA says it enhances the level of civic engagement of its graduates.

But we found that, relative to these other two groups, it doesn't in fact increase subsequent civic engagement. That's not a criticism of the organization. It's a finding that reflects differences among three groups of subjects who were all very active before they applied to TFA, all three are accepted, but exhibit different trajectories afterward. TFA graduates wind up being, in general, less active than the other two groups and especially the nonmatriculants. That raises all sorts of interesting questions it seems to me about the impact of this particular service experience. What is it about that experience that's seemingly depressing the levels of subsequent service? That's the interesting question.

CG: *Almost a decade ago, there was quite a lot of debate about whether service led to more political engagement, and among some, there was the belief that service needed to lead to political involvement; otherwise, it wasn't "deeper" civic engagement. As a result, there was a great deal of effort in trying to ascertain—using data—whether service led to long-term political involvement among young people—efforts that included the development of new sets of variables representing political or civic engagement.*

Today, there doesn't seem to be as much

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discussion about this issue. So is it important that these programs make an effort to prove that they lead to civic outcomes if they're doing other things just as well?

DM: It seems to me that TFA's main mission is to provide important educational services to resource-poor school districts, urban and rural school districts. That's a terrific mission. I'm persuaded that they do it pretty well and that that ought to be the fundamental basis for judging TFA. The fact that it doesn't dramatically enhance the subsequent civic participation of its graduates seems to me to be a relatively minor matter. As a social scientist, it's an interesting issue to me personally, but it shouldn't be seen as a devastating critique of TFA given its central mission.

CG: *So why are the civic outcomes interesting or important, though, to you or to anyone else?*

DM: I go back to [political scientist] Bob Putnam, who claims that the foundations of civic life in the U.S. are weakening, that in some sense civic participation is in trouble in the United States and [that] for a democracy to be viable, there has to be an engaged civic sector.

I think it's a legitimate concern that the civic sector is atrophying and that young people are not encouraged to engage in civic behavior. So besides debating what the reality of civic life in the United States is, we ought to be concerned with what kinds of experiences encourage a kind of enduring commitment to civic participation among young people. Lots of people have worried about that, and I think, in general, we're at a moment where we assume that any kind of youth service—youth civic engagement—invariably produces positive effects, and I think that's absolutely false.

I believe that, if we really did a series of systematic comparative studies of the long-term effects of various kinds of civic engagement or youth service, we'd see highly variable effects. That's what I see in the study of Freedom Summer versus the study of TFA. I think if we took these studies seriously, we would see variation in effects, and we ought to then be interested in identifying those features of service experiences

that help us understand the variation in impact. We ought to try to identify those features of youth service—youth civic engagement—that produce longer-term effects. If we're concerned that civic life is on the wane in the United States, we ought to be interested in finding out what specific kinds of programs or activities encourage a longer-term engagement in politics, civic life, etc.

I don't like the fact that we simply assume that if kids do service-learning courses or people participate in Teach for America that, invariably, this is going to have long-term positive consequences for increased civic participation. I think that's almost certainly not true, and we ought to be interested in looking at variation and trying to understand what's producing it.

CG: *Recently there was a public back-and-forth about whether service—and people's increasing interest in it—was a movement. Do you think it is?*

DM: I don't think I would call it a movement. I think we throw that term around very loosely. And by *movement*, I think we should mean something a little more restrictive.

CG: *Why not?*

DM: For me, a movement typically involves some kind of organized, sustained effort to produce change—or maybe resist change—and that change effort has to involve—at least to a certain degree—some kinds of nonroutine, noninstitutionalized forms of collective action, and I think that's the distinctive feature of a true social movement.

There are lots of activities in the world where people are allegedly trying to change something, but are we going to call all that activity social movements? That's not fine grained enough. I think movements in general involve forms of collective action that are nonroutine, sometimes disruptive, and that's what differentiates something that I would call a movement from other kinds of institutionalized change efforts.

CG: *One of your study's findings is that graduates of TFA report lower levels of employment*

in pro-social jobs. How was pro-social employment defined? Did you look at post-TFA employment in terms of nonprofit work or government service? Also, what about people who work in these spheres and see that as part of their "service"?

DM: Yes, that's why we looked at, again, six or seven different measures, because we wondered whether people whose paid employment was very service oriented would not count that as volunteer service on some of our other measures. So we wanted to definitely differentiate the two.

Pro-social employment—I don't have the specific operational definition in front of me—but it was jobs clearly in the so-called helping professions. That included teaching, but also nonprofit work, etc. Certain kinds of legal work were counted, but it depended on the kind of law. So we had lots of detailed information on what their current job was, and we had a set of criteria by which we defined some positions as pro-social employment, and we applied that across the three groups; and again, all three groups were—the rates of pro-social employment were pretty darn high, pretty impressive—but the TFA graduates ranked lowest on that dimension as well.

CG: *Why is that?*

DM: In analyzing the data, we tried hard to figure out what kinds of factors explained this slightly lower rate of subsequent civic participation, service, etc., and it was hard to identify specific factors. Here's as much as I can say: about 20 percent of the graduates report feeling disillusioned by their TFA experience at the end of the experience. Again, we tried to unpack that; we tried to look at the factors that seemed to predict disillusionment, and we didn't get very far. All we know is that about 20 percent in the end concluded that they were somewhat disillusioned by their experience, and they were also very likely to say they felt like they were not very effective as teachers, and then we had a lot of open-ended items. And so we've looked at a lot of what people actually told us on those open-ended items, and there was a fairly consistent story.

A small percentage of all graduates—just under 20 percent—got to the end of the experience—they hung in there to the end—but in the end, came to see this whole issue of educational inequality as much bigger and much more systemic and they came to see the TFA approach as not very effective.

Yes, TFA was a great organization for trying to do the work it was doing, but the problem was much greater than the approach suggested. And so, they exited feeling somewhat ineffective themselves and disillusioned with this particular approach to this daunting problem of educational inequality. It doesn't necessarily mean they were down on TFA, although some of them were. They simply came to doubt that this was an effective way of addressing this very challenging issue, and they felt pretty ineffective as teachers. If you feel that way, your willingness to re-up and engage in another really intensive service experience, I think, is obviously going to be diminished.

If you take that 20 percent who felt disillusioned out of the graduate group, the rates of subsequent civic participation, service, etc. are statistically indistinguishable from the nonmatriculants. So my sense is that—for a small percentage of the TFA graduates—their experience actually discourages subsequent participation. For the vast majority of graduates, they have a terrific experience, they feel positive about what they've done, and it has no real implications for subsequent service, political activity, etc. They're very likely to stay very engaged and to continue to focus their energies on educational inequality, which is something that TFA does very well. It encourages the majority of their graduates to stay active on this issue, and that's another part of TFA's mission. They are committed to gradually building a very large alumni community around this issue.

CG: *Have you considered digging deeper into the data regarding that 20 percent and finding out whether there something that's common to them that distinguishes them from the other 80 percent?*

DM: Yes, this is the core of this issue. It's the key to the finding in general. The difference between

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these three groups is this 20 percent. And yes, I'd love to dig into it more.

I think it would require interviews of some sort. This is a very intensive experience, and for graduates with very different characteristics, some percentage of them—again, in this case 20 percent—at the end wind up going, “Well, I worked really hard and I admire what this organization is trying to do, but I don’t think I was ultimately very effective, and I’ve come to the conclusion that this is not the most effective approach to this very tricky issue” and that they came to that [conclusion] for very different reasons or with very different background characteristics. So you’d want to interview them and say, “How did you come to this conclusion? What was it about your experience that led you in the end to this conclusion about your own efforts and about the effectiveness of the organization?”

CG: *One of the most interesting things in your article is your distinction between service learning and school-based community service and also between school-based service that stresses civic engagement and school-based activities that don't. And that the latter seems to encourage more civic engagement over the long term. Can you talk about that?*

DM: I'm very interested in this issue too, and this is my provisional take on the matter. There are kinds of activities in schools, but also, I suppose, in the community where it's not that the goal is to encourage service or civic engagement but these are collective activities where people are—whether they know it or not—engaged in civic life. They're involved in collective action around some issue, even if that issue is not really about politics or civic life. They're involved in some club on campus, and they're developing a set of civic skills on the one hand and maybe an orientation to collective life that may pay dividends in the future.

So they're developing a sense of themselves and their competence in groups that may in fact translate into various kinds of group participation—some of it civic—in the future. I touched on this earlier, but the more collective the service or civic experience—whether or not we call it

that—I believe the greater the likelihood that you will engage in collective activity in the future.

The point is the Teach for America experience for many graduates is also a very individual one. They are up at 1:00 in the morning slogging through the next day's lesson plan or grading papers or whatever. They weren't engaged in the community in any meaningful way, and although TFA has all sorts of regional associations, they weren't very involved in the regional TFA association; they basically slogged through two years as a “lone” teacher. And that also appears to be related to whether you wind up being disillusioned.

You're not getting this collective sense of empowerment or mission because your experience is fundamentally isolating. Freedom Summer—these folks were housed communally in freedom houses or in private homes in Mississippi with other volunteers, and on the outside was this hostile white community. So there was this really strong us-them dynamic, and they really came to feel a part of this movement community, and many of them came out of Mississippi absolutely committed to finding other versions of this experience in the North.

So if we really did this set of careful, systematic, comparative studies of youth activism or youth service, we're going to find variation in the long-term effects, and what we really ought to try to identify are the mechanisms that account for that variation. I would bet that one of the big features that differentiates the longer-term effects is just how communal or collective the experience is.

CG: *The personal/individual versus the collective service experience—and whether the latter results in a better one—continues to be debated, especially given the advent of online activism, which some argue is more individual. But some believe that these efforts can be just as effective in social change and that behind the arguments about “collectivity” is a mindset of a 1960s-sort of notion of civic engagement (e.g., protests, etc).*

DM: I'm not pushing politics with a capital P. I'm not pushing a version of '60s politics. All I mean is that if your service experience [takes place] in the year 2010, the more collective it is, I'm betting

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that it's more likely to produce enduring effects. And again, as I mentioned earlier, so you're the president of the French club at your high school. Nobody is going to confuse that with '60s politics. But I'm saying that probably has much greater implications for your behavior in the future than being in a service-learning course.

Essentially, the more collective the experience, the more I think you are encouraged to engage in the future, and my point about Teach for America is that it looks like those who slogged through as individual teachers were more likely to get to the end of the experience and were more likely to go, "That was exhausting; I don't think I was all that effective; I don't see educational inequality changing in a big way; I'm going to get back to my life; I'm going to divest here a little." And so, this is not about '60s politics versus [today's levels of civic engagement] to me. This is about how collective is this civic experience that you're having—whether we characterize it as politics or not.

CG: *It's interesting to me that your study found that the TFA organization was important to so many and that they got identity from it at a time when the way in which people—particularly young people—are choosing to engage and be excited about engagement is not about organizations. In fact, research shows [that] young people mov[e] away from organizations as their primary outlet for civic engagement, as evidenced by the decline in membership among large, nonprofit advocacy and political organizations. So what does it mean for civic engagement when TFA alumni feel so connected to TFA, the organization, but not necessarily to other forms of civic and political life?*

DM: I've got two daughters. They are densely connected, but not through formal organizations at all. They live on Facebook, among other things. They are wildly more interactive, engaged with other people, than I am, but it's mediated through technology, as you're pointing out. But fundamentally, people still are social creatures who derive their sense of themselves and their values and priorities through interaction with others.

Nothing has changed. The medium through

which they interact has changed, but it's not as if people are no longer influenced by their peers or something. My point here is that if, like TFA, you can create a set of procedures—a program that encourages people to engage with the organization—those organizations can continue to be central sources of meaning and identity in people's lives.

It's not that organizations have lost the capacity to do that; it's that they're now competing with other mechanisms, other vehicles that connect people. So we go, "Oh, organizations are dying." Well, yes, they're in a much more competitive environment, and lots of young people don't identify with organizations and seek their social connections through much more direct forms of mediation like Facebook, etc., which are themselves, again, communities of a sort. But it doesn't mean that organizations can't compete effectively. But they're going to have to design programs that young people come to value, and if in fact they can successfully recruit individuals, those organizations can be again just as important as sources of identity and meaning as they've always been.

CG: *As you know, there's a lot of energy around national service, with policies being promoted and passed, money allocated. Do you see this as a positive trend? Will they help to encourage civic engagement across the country?*

DM: I know I'm repeating myself here, but I really think we have to move away from the assumption that we're going to invariably see effects from youth service or youth activism. I'd love to see a richer set of really systematic comparative studies of the longer-term effects of a range of service experiences, because I think what they would show is highly variable effects, and I think that would be very important for policy makers to understand. Just because you create a service program it's not going to necessarily produce long-term civic engagement.

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