

Mid-career professionals take their skills into classrooms

Jesse, David . Detroit Free Press ; Detroit, Mich. [Detroit, Mich]. 29 Sep 2011: A.3.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers take new route to classroom With an engineering degree from the University of Michigan and a career under way, 26-year-old Alicia Lane's decision to become a public school teacher in an impoverished urban center might seem rare, or even strange. More people like Lane are learning the ins and outs of classroom instruction through one-year fellowships that offer master's degrees and compact teacher training schedule.

FULL TEXT

FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

As she tutored Detroit students writing their college essays last year, Alicia Lane found her true calling.

But how to become a teacher? The 26-year-old Detroit resident already had an engineering degree and a job with the US Army Corps of Engineers.

Her passion was perfect, however, for a new fellowship at the University of Michigan that trains mid-career engineers and scientists to become teachers.

"It makes me feel better to help (students)," she said.

The new one-year program offers her a master's degree as she learns about classroom instruction. She'll be a high school teacher by next year and is in a Detroit Public Schools classroom this school year for her training.

Mid-career professionals can bring a rich experience to the classroom, but they already have degrees and don't want to go through an undergraduate-level certification.

The fellowship is part of a national push to transform these types of professionals into teachers through nontraditional means. In 1999-2009, those entering the profession through unconventional routes grew 380%, according to the federal government.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in a Free Press interview this month, said that's a good sign: "Teachers who are coming right out of industry ... know what skills students need to learn."

Teachers take new route to classroom

With an engineering degree from the University of Michigan and a career under way, 26-year-old Alicia Lane's

decision to become a public school teacher in an impoverished urban center might seem rare, or even strange.

But it's an increasingly popular choice as some mid-career professionals turn to teaching for a needed change or way to help students achieve in difficult situations.

More people like Lane are learning the ins and outs of classroom instruction through one-year fellowships that offer master's degrees and compact teacher training schedule.

Six Michigan universities – including Wayne State, Eastern Michigan and Michigan State universities – are home to W.K. Kellogg's Woodrow Wilson Michigan Teaching Fellowship. Many of the participants are mid-career professionals in the science and math fields.

Lane is receiving her training through U-M. She'll spend this school year in Detroit Public Schools' Western International High School observing teachers and also teaching herself.

She said she isn't worried about switching to a new career with lower pay. She's more concerned about ultimately finding a teaching job. She said she hopes teacher training will help her translate scientific knowledge into useful high school lesson plans.

"I know how to use it (in my job)," she said. "That's not the same as teaching it. It's a good thing there's a lot of observing other teachers before I have to teach it."

National data show a dramatic spike in the number of teachers entering the profession through nontraditional certification routes – including those like Lane who worked in various industries before switching to teaching.

Prior to 1980, it was extremely rare for teachers to enter the profession other than from a traditional undergraduate degree program. But teachers trained through unconventional routes gradually grew and then took off in the last five years, according to the National Center for Education Information's Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011.

In the 2003-04 school year, 38,519 teachers entered the profession through an alternative route, which the center defines as someone who already had a bachelor's degree and then received a teaching certificate. That number jumped to 50,000 in the 2004-05 school year and was 59,000 in 2008-09, the last year for which data are available.

Teaching skills

Mid-career professionals have knowledge, but that doesn't mean they'll be skilled teachers, said Dennis Van Roekel, the president of the National Education Association and a 23-year high school math teacher.

"My failure to reach students in my career had nothing to do with my not knowing math," he said. "It was about not having the teaching skills."

He said in a recent interview he'd rather see great teachers be taught more about the content than having people with great content knowledge being trained as teachers.

Debate over the best ways to train teachers is part of a growing national discussion about how to increase student achievement.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has been highly critical of the current state of teacher training – particularly colleges and universities that operate academic schools of education. That training needs to be more focused on teaching skills that help in the classroom, he said. That's also true for professional development of existing teachers, he said.

Overall, he said, more talented people need to become teachers. That's where the teaching fellowships come into play, he said.

'I fell in love with it'

In high school and college, teaching wasn't among Lane's career plans.

A combination of an internship at NASA in her hometown of Huntsville, Ala., and her involvement in the FIRST Robotics program sparked her interest in engineering.

That led her to Spellman College, which offered a dual degree in engineering that required her to finish up course work at another college. She chose U-M, in part because of available scholarship money.

After graduation, she took a job in Detroit with the US Army Corps of Engineers.

"By the time I was done with school, I wasn't completely sold on engineering, but I had a degree and (the corps) offered me a job," she said.

She also started her volunteer teaching in Detroit and was helping DPS students improve their writing and work on college application essays.

But something wasn't right: She found herself daydreaming at work about the Saturday tutoring sessions.

She knew she needed to change careers, even though she already had a college degree. She also knew from her Saturday experience that she'd need help.

"I was surprised at how unprepared I was to teach." She spent most of her time trying to make sure everyone was quiet and focused on their work.

"They just pointed me at the classroom and said, 'There it is.' I had no idea what I was getting into, but I fell in love with it. I just couldn't stop thinking about the students, all the help they needed and what I was going to do."

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How fellowship program works, what it offers

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Woodrow Wilson Michigan Teaching Fellowship helps mid-career professionals and others become high school teachers. It's open to college seniors, graduates and career changers. Fellows must have majored or have a strong professional background in a STEM field, (science, technology, engineering, math).

The fellowship provides:

* Admission to a master's degree program at one of six participating Michigan universities.

* A \$30,000 stipend.

* Preparation in a high-need urban or rural secondary school, such as in the Detroit Public Schools district. Fellows agree to teach for three years at a high-need school.

Deadline for early decision is Oct. 19. Regular deadline is Jan. 10, 2012. For more information, go to www.wteachingfellowship.org/about_the_program/michigan.php.

ID_Code: C4-109290444

DETAILS

Subject:	Colleges & universities; Scholarships & fellowships; College students; Mathematics teachers; Mathematics education; Teacher education
Company / organization:	Name: Public School System-Detroit MI; NAICS: 611110; Name: University of Michigan; NAICS: 611310
Lexile score:	1360 L
Publication title:	Detroit Free Press; Detroit, Mich.
Pages:	A.3
Publication year:	2011
Publication date:	Sep 29, 2011
column:	Fulfilling a passion to teach
Section:	Metro
Publisher:	Gannett Co., Inc.
Place of publication:	Detroit, Mich.
Country of publication:	United States, Detroit, Mich.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News

ProQuest document ID: 894721480

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mid-career-professionals-take-their-skills-into/docview/894721480/se-2?accountid=46320>

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Last updated: 2017-11-19

Database: eLibrary

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