Hello and welcome to another CareerCast brought to you by the Walton College Career Development Center. My name is Heather Sprandel and I am excited to have Jack Avery joining me today. Jack is currently an MBA student in the Walton College; he is also a consumer sales representative for Ash Grove packaging. Jack is going to tell you a lot about himself today, but really why I invited him to participate in this CareerCast is to share his experience with the Teach For America program. Because we have a lot of business students, more than you would think, who are interested in participating in a teaching experience and this is just an opportunity for us to share information with business students about a rare and I think rewarding teaching experience. So welcome Jack to the CareerCast.

Thanks for having me.

Well we are glad you are here. Why don’t you start by tell our audience a little bit about yourself?

Okay, I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. And when I graduated from high school in 2001 I went and attend DePauw University, not to be confused with the Blue Devils in Chicago. I attended their liberal arts college in Greencastle, Indiana and graduated from there in 2005. At that time I decided to enter the Teach For America corps program and two years later I accepted a potion with Ash Grove Packaging. They are a manufacturing company that functions all over the United States and I am a computer sales representative, here in Northwest Arkansas and all of western Arkansas and Oklahoma. I deal with Home Depot, Lowes, and various lumber yards and hardware stores to make sure that they are getting very efficient products.

Very good. Let’s talk about your previous career with the Teach For America program. Can you tell us how you learned about the program and what got you interested in Teach For America?

I was a senior and majored in Political Science and minored in sociology. And I wasn’t exactly sure where I wanted my life career path to go. So I was kind of flirting with the idea of business, flirting with the idea of law, and the idea of government. There were a number of things, but I just didn’t know what I wanted to get into. Then I learned about this program called Teaching For America, which is a social movement working to close the achievement gap in the United States, and I thought this would be a great opportunity. You know, this is a two year program, it will give me a chance to evaluate what I want to do with my life and it is a little bit different than what a lot of people may typically want to do. A lot of students go into business, a lot of political science majors go into politics or law and that isn’t what I wanted to do. So I thought I would go and join this two year program and I ended up in there. And they were pretty well known on my campus, so I got a lot of literature on Teach for America and did some research into it. So I was pretty familiar with it before I entered into it and started to apply for it. But, it just is kind of what I wanted to do.

So I looked, before you and I got together today to talk, on Teach of America’s website. I think it will help our audience to know what the mission of Teach of America is, their mission is: “to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting our nation’s most promising future leaders in the effort.” And it seems they recruit recent college graduates from all background and career interests to commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools. They provide training and ongoing support necessary to ensure the teachers are successful in the low-income communities. So with that information, maybe you can tell us what your two year experience was like and where it started and where you ended up and basically what happened.
Okay. When you apply, and it is a different application process today than when I applied five years ago, you receive a list of locations that teach of America is currently involved in. You know various communities across the country; I was accepted to teach middle school language arts, in Charlotte, North Carolina. At that time you go through a serious training process that summer you accept the program. Let me back up; when you apply you go to a group interview. Before you go into that interview you are provide with a list of all locations that Teach of America functions in. At that time you go into the interview with a list of desired locations in which you would like to teach in, should you be selected for the program. And you can list 1-50, however many locations there are, 1 being the place that I would absolutely go to and at the bottom of the list the place that I would not go if I were accepted into the program and selected to go to this location. For me, Charlotte, NC was actually my number 1 choice. So I was accepted to go to Charlotte, NC and I was selected to go teach English/Language Arts in middle school. You accept under those pretenses that I will go to Charlotte, NC to teach English Language Arts, you may be accepted to go to the Mississippi Delta to teach math, as an example. That is what you receive in your acceptance packet. If you accept the offer to go to Teach for America, you go to your region and go through a rigorous training program in various locations across the country. Because typically most people that apply do not have an education background. So they give you a crash course, a five week prep program to teach you essentially to be a teacher. They pack in about 4 years worth of what an education major would go through into 5 weeks. Then they send you back to your region and you become a full-time teacher. So I did this 5 week training program in Houston that is where my training program at the time. I finished it in 5 weeks where you as the student are taught to do curriculum development, learn how to do lesson plans, all of that. Then I went back to Charlotte, NC where I had the classroom and began teaching in the fall of that year. I taught 7th grade English/Language Arts my first year and my second year I taught 6th grade English/Language Arts. My first year I taught three classes and my student population was about 25 - 30 per class and they were either accelerated or honors. Which means they either tested on grade level or just below grade level essentially. And my second year I taught 6th grade 2 classes that tested on or above grade level. And what I mean by grade level is they are reading at that grade level. They could read at that grade level, not below. So 6th grade read at a 6th grade reading level and 7th graders read at a 7th grade reading level. And I also had a group from ESL or English as a Second Language that I worked with in my second year. Which is a whole different set of challenges. So that in a nutshell is my two years. Would you like me to elaborate on anything more about my two years in Charlotte?

Well, I'm curious. You got Charlotte. That was your first choice, right. That is urban, it definitely classifies as urban. Was the school that you went to a school in financial crisis or a low-income school?

Yes. Every school in Teach for America is a low income school. My school was actually 98% below the poverty line. So the student population was below the poverty line. The way that we qualify is the number that students qualify for free or reduced lunches. Now that varies from state to state. Arkansas might have different qualifications for what is below the poverty line. But for North Carolina, if you qualify for Free or Reduced Lunches you are considered to be below the poverty line. The ethnic makeup of my school was, about 60% African American, 30% Hispanic, and 10% other.

After your 5 weeks of intensive train program in Houston, do you receive teaching certification?

No. And this varies from state to state. What you receive is an initial licensure. Like I said before, most Teach for America corp members don't have a background in education. Most education
majors come out with their teaching certificate. What most states have is an initial licensure program. Where the state gives you a license for a certain period of time. In North Carolina it was a three year initial licensure program. So within that three years you had to take certain courses to prove that you are working towards your certification. In my first two years I had to take a number of courses to prove that I was continuing my education toward my teaching certificate. And teach for America, in just about every region partners up with a local university to help you with this process. And aid you with the certification, should you choose to do it. If you are going in and you are just going to do two years of teaching and step away from the classroom, you generally don't have to do your certificate. It takes about two years to get your teaching certificate when you are working full-time. I took one time about 9 credits when I was working towards my teaching certificate and it is about 15 credit hours in North Carolina to get your teachers certificate. So no, I did not have my teaching certificate. I had my initial licensure for three years.

Now when you are actually teaching and you’ve started teaching your 2 year teaching program. Is this a paid experience?

Yes you are a full time teacher. Essentially after the training program is over, through the first summer, Teach of America really functions as a placement organization. While I was in training in Houston, the North Carolina staff was working diligently to place myself and all my other corps members in a school. So when I came back to Charlotte, I was a full time teacher in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district. I was a paid employee of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system. Teach for America has partnered up with the AmeriCorp program. So while you are teaching and getting paid full time as a first year or second year teacher. You are receiving AmeriCorp benefits from Teach for America, which you can use to pay off student loans or if you want to use it to go into a graduate program. You can pay towards that. Typically it is used for education funding. So that is the benefit of Teach for America. And as a teacher you receive all the benefits that the full-time teacher would receive in the school district that you are teaching in.

Great. Okay. So you not coming from an education background. With a political science background and then going into education. Were you freaked out on the first day of teaching alone? What were the challenge that you faced?

Absolutely. The first day when the bell rang and the students were sitting in their desks. Looking at me and I was standing in front of them. I sort of had a moment of; wow what am I going to now. Up to that point there was always another teacher in the classroom supporting me and helping me to develop my craft. So there was a challenge in that regard. The challenge wasn't necessarily with the curriculum. I wasn't me learning how to teach English because there are a lot of resources at your disposal. There are curriculum advisors, programmers out there to help you along the way. The biggest difficulty that I fell into the first day was the realm of student discipline. It is kind of an interesting transition from being a student to being a teacher of students. Up until that point in my life I had always been sitting in the desks watching the teacher, learning from the teacher. Now the roles had flipped and I was on the other side of the table. And I had to kind of wrap my head around the idea of being the disciplinarian, being the one in charge of the education of the students, and not necessarily being their friend but being their mentor, coach. I had to get these students to want to learn, to want to read a novel, to get excited about their education, and be excited about the English language and wanting to pick up a novel and read it for fun. And at the end of the school year, I didn't want them to have to be forced to read by me. So that is some of the challenges that you face as a first year teacher. Now I think that some people with curriculum, like in a math class or a science
class. I would have probably faced some curriculum challenges. Fortunately, being a political science major I felt that I had a pretty strong grasp of the written and spoken English language. But really the problem to me was the transitioning to the adult role in the classroom for 90 minutes. And that is challenge in itself to hold the attention of adolescent children to be in class for 90 minutes at one time as it is.

Right. And how old were you when you started?

I was 22. So a 22 year old, still thinking I am cool, I am hip to a bunch of 12, 13, 14 year old adolescents. I was not cool anymore to them. I was not their friend. I was their teacher and there was not a single thing that I would do in that class to make me cool. As hard I tried I was not cool. No, now I was a teacher. I am Mr. Avery. For all they knew, as soon as I walked out of the classroom I would plug myself into the wall because I was a robot. So if you would put yourself in my shoes, in the eyes of a sixth or seventh grader. If you remember any of those teachers you probably do not. Because you were forcing them to read and write, which is not fun to do when you are in sixth and seventh grade. So that was a challenge in itself. And really it is not the curriculum it is selling to these kids to want to learn about foreshadowing for me in English. Or how do I get these kids to learn want to learn about algebra. Why is algebra relevant to them, in sixth and seventh grade? Why is geometry relevant to them at 14 years old? And that is some of the biggest challenges. And in an underprivileged, underperforming school there is a whole other set of issues where you don’t necessarily have necessarily have the support system at home. Where a lot of these kids are going home and they’re teaching, their younger brothers and sisters. And they’re have to take care of them, they’re having to cook dinner because they may not have parents at home. They may be at work, they may be working the night shift. And sometimes they aren’t living in the nicest areas of town and they bring that baggage into the classroom. So that presents a additional barrier as an educator in the classroom to keep their attention when they know they have to go home and cook dinner and they have to clean the house and they have to take care of a younger brother or younger sister. So there are additional barriers that may not be prevalent in the lives that are walking into the classroom. For me, I came home after school every day and my mom was there ready to help me out with homework or force me to sit down and do homework. So those are some of the barriers that you face with your students lives outside of the classroom. And it really does pay to know the students and what they may be facing in their personal lives. Because this may impact how they function inside and outside the classroom.

Of course, definitely. What about facilities? Was the school suffering in the facilities, resources being in a lower income area?

I’ll answer that in two levels. I’ll that first in more of a broader perspective, in fellow corps members from across the country and then I’ll answer for my specific school in which I taught. Across the country, depending on your location in which you taught. You will run into facilities that are below where they should be. I think on a national stage, the No Child Left Behind has provided a lot of school districts with a lot of resources to upgrade. But there is still a lot of schools across the country that are not where they should be as far as the infrastructure of the school itself and the resources that are provided to you. I would say that you are going to probably see that more in rural communities than you will in urban communities because urban communities tend to get a little bit more focus from the local and state government officials than do rural communities. And it is harder to get certain resources such as, internet, cable, computers, and so on and so forth in rural communities than it is in urban communities because the infrastructure is not there in rural
communities. Now for me teaching in Charlotte. There has been a lot of investment in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. So I had a lot of resources at my disposal, as far as laptops, computers, TVs, things of that nature. So I didn’t necessarily feel that burden of having the lack of resources, but I do know that there were a lot of teachers did.

So Jack I am curious, as we defiantly have listeners who are undeclared majors, business undergraduate students, graduate business students who might be considering teaching as an option. I am curious what types of skills or competencies these people should have going into teaching. And then what types of skills or competencies you think they will gain or enhance they’ve participated in a teaching program.

I would say first and foremost, organizational skills and time management skills. Simply because you have to have every single minute or every single day of every single class period planned very precisely. You have these students for a very limited time and a lot of material to cover in a year’s span. In the Teach For America program and teaching in an underperforming school. You may at times have students who are below grade level in reading and math skills that you have to bring them even further along to get them to where they need to be to be successful in the classroom and in their life in general. So you have to know exactly what you will be teaching to these students every single day and where you will be taking these students. In addition to that, I would work on performance. Every day is a presentation. Every day you have to go into your classroom and hook your student and get them to want to listen to you in that 90 minute block and make them want to learn about what you have to teach them on that given day. So those are the two things that you will develop as a teacher, but are also good to have a foundation of when you enter into the program. Personally I didn’t have the time management and organizational skills and boy I tell you. When I walked into that classroom, by the end of that first year I knew where I was taking my students. At the end of every class period I knew where I was taking my students and I had an objective and I was going to meet that objective. It took a while to get to that point. And it takes a while to get comfortable with the curriculum to make it relevant to the students in their lives. So those are things that you will absolutely develop. But people that are interested in doing Teach For America and probably transition into business will to give a quick and concise presentation that will help you further in life as you move along in business or any other field in which you may be giving a presentation. Hook your listeners and what you are selling. In education it is curriculum, in business it is your product. And get your audience in education. In this case, your students excited about what you have to tell them. So those are some of the skills that I would recommend that you fine tune before stepping into a classroom. Having a quick windmill and being able to think on your feet is always another thing. Because they are constant disruptions in the classroom, sometimes. In my case, you had fire drills, you have sick students, you have students that are always going to try and test you in the classroom by misbehaving that you have to very quickly distinguish, in the classroom. That you may not necessarily be prepared for. And there is no amount of planning or preparing that you can do and walk into a classroom and know what is going to happen in a 90 minute block. You can never prepare for a fire drill. You can never prepare for a misbehaving student. You know that it is going to happen at some point you just don’t know when and at what time in your lesson. So you just have to be able to think with a quick wind and be able to pick up where it left off and keep on moving forward.

That sounds like someone in a teaching role or after successfully completing a two year teaching program like the one you’ve done. You could probably build up and develop more confidence in yourself to manage many different things. People, projects, time constraints, goals and objectives. I
mean it sounds like you are enhancing a lot of competencies in a teaching role that are transferable into business and the workforce, am I right?

Absolutely. Another thing to through in there, besides the fact that you are managing projects you are managing 24-30 students at any given time. If you approach it from a business perspective, you have 24-30 employees that you have to bring towards an objective at a given time, you are giving an assignment and they have to accomplish that assignment. So there are a lot of parallels between what a business student may be approaching at a given time that you will see in the classroom. It’s just in the classroom you will see it for a very short time period. You know you have a 90-minute block where you are trying to get these students to an end, whereas if you work in a business you may have a week or a month. You may have a whole team of very well educated professionals where with these students you’re giving them these skills to be successful and trying to get them to definitive end game. So there are a lot of parallels that happen between a business environment and what happens in a classroom.

So how did the Teach For America program change or enhance your career outlook or career progression?

As a result of my Teach for America program, I will always have a great passion towards education. When I first moved to Northwest Arkansas, after finishing Teach for America, I very quickly started studying and learning about what was going on in the education world in Northwest Arkansas. And I am always following educational trending. It is just something that you become very passionate about, I became very passionate about it as a result of my experience in the classroom. I think that at some point down the line I will get involved in education. May be not necessarily as a teacher in the classroom, but as a tutor some day or function in the PTA (Parent Teacher Association) of the school or school board on a private school or something along those lines. I believe that I will get back involved with education in some shape, way, or form. Probably right now in a voluntary capacity; but, I find that I am very passionate about education. When I talk about it I get very passionate about it and it is too important to me to just walk away from. And I found that a lot of my friends and colleagues that were involved in the program felt very passionate about education, even though they may not be directly involved in the education community right now.

What made you decide not to continue to teach after your two year commitment was over with?

Well in the education world, as previously discussed if you are not certified you can only teach for so long. I had a three licensure in which I could have taught. I could have taught another year without having to obtain an actual certificate. At the end of two years, I made a decision that I either had to go back and do a lot of education and finish my certification and get a degree in education which was going to be a lot of time, money, and effort while teaching or I could start looking around and transition into business. And I started looking around a little bit and I decided at the time that it would be best for me to transition into business and I have enjoyed the transition, not to say that I could have stayed in education I very well could have, but at the time it was personally the right decision to step away from the classroom. I know a lot of people who did stay and are still in the classroom. I know a number of people who decided to go into a full-time graduate degree program and I know a number of people who transitioned out of the program and into the business world and into the business world as well. So it was kind of a personal decision on my end and it was not an easy decision to make. To walk away from the classroom, you have built friendships with fellow teachers, with the school district, and you build a relationship with the students. And you build
friendships with students as a mentor or coach. So it was a tough decision to make, but I felt that it was the best decision for me at the time in 2007 and I think looking back that it was probably the right decision for me as there has been a lot of changes in the education community over the past couple of years.

So if we have a listener right now who is considering teaching as a career option for a short stint or may be forever, their entire career, what would you like to say to them?

Your first year is very difficult, if you don’t have an education background. And even people that have an education background their first year is difficult. It is because you have so much that you have to manage in a given time frame that you may not be used to. So my best piece of advice is do not become jaded by your first year in the classroom. Give it at least two years. Because your second year you will be able to develop your craft as a teacher and have a deeper understanding of how to be an effective teacher in the classroom. And that is why the Teach For America program is a two year program because it really does take you two years to become an effective educator in the classroom. Some people will walk into the classroom on day one and be amazing on the first day all the way to the last day of that first year and through the rest of their career as an educator. But for some people, myself included, it took quite a while to comfortable in the classroom. My learning curve was very steep that first year. I would just encourage people to not lose hope when they become distracted, frustrated, and possibly jaded in that first year of teaching because it can be very very difficult at times. But the reward that you receive at the end of the year far far surpass all of the frustration that you may have throughout the year. And another thing about education is you will not see immediate growth out of students on a day to day basis. The intrinsic reward will come at the end of the year or will come in small little victories. Like seeing a student open a book and get excited about it or seeing a student get an A on a test when they failed every test up to that point. It is the little victories that push you forward and I would encourage anyone who is considering teaching and go into education be diligent about any one student or give up on your career as an educator. Keep on trucking it, essentially fighting to get them the good grades. You’ll see the intrinsic rewards with the little payoffs that will leave you wanting to come back year in and year out.

That’s great. Really what we advocate for in the career center is to find their passion, their career passion and interest. And it sounds like you did and this experience has really helped you. Provided you with a new passion, new interest, and you’re a great advocate for educators and teaching so I appreciate that very much. And I want to thank you very much for your time that you have spent with us in this edition of Walton College Career Center’s Career Cast. So thanks for being here today. Jack.

Well thank you for having me and I hope that I was of some help for all of the students who are interested in Teach For America and education.

You have been thanks so much.