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This Fellowship Wants to Build Up Entrepreneurs in 18 Cities Across the Country

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Photo Credit: Venture for America

By Courtney Gabrielson

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The [Venture for America](#) fellowship program has an impressive pedigree.

Founded in 2011 by entrepreneur Andrew Yang, its two-year program looks to connect recent college graduates with startups in high-growth cities around the country.

It was inspired by Yang's frustrating journey to find not only success as a startup leader, but also mentorship and direction as a professional. He knew he wasn't alone. During his time as head of test prep company, Manhattan GMAT, "he saw hundreds of young people searching for the right career paths," said Venture for American Director of Communications and Events Leandra Elberger. "He realized that he could give them the same experience he had learning from experienced entrepreneurs and help match them with companies and cities that needed their talent and energy."

"We try to be visible in the things that are taking place in those communities."

The program recruits from colleges across the U.S., and gives accepted applicants full-time, salaried jobs at vetted startups in one of the VFA cities of their choice, an entrepreneurial crash course at the program's five-week Training Camp, access to mentors, a crowdfunding competition, accelerator, seed fund and more.

For VFA, there is no perfect applicant or participant. "Our fellows come from a variety of backgrounds, schools, and majors and possess many different hard and soft skills," Elberger said. The next class is expected to have between 180 to 200 participants with a goal of getting between 10 to 15 fellows to each of its cities. Enrolling in the program is at no cost to the fellow, with the VFA handling fundraising.

What makes applicants stand out, however? As applications for the next cohort are [now open](#), it's a question that's very much on the VFA team's mind. "We look for a strong, independent work ethic, someone who finds ways to thrive in the face of pressure and ambiguity, and those who want to make a real impact in a community and at a company, and maybe someday build a company of their own," Elberger said.

And 20 percent of those alums do just that. A VFA fact sheet indicated that since 2014, fellows have raised more than \$14 million of seed funding and created 2,000 jobs.

Investing in cities is another big element of what VFA does, and it considers "three key factors" when entering a new place: need, entrepreneurial ecosystem and fundraising potential. "We're looking for cities with a vibrant and growing startup community that can provide growth opportunities for an entry-level hire," Elberger said. "We also need the support of local institutions." The program has a presence in 18 locations, including Cincinnati, Providence, Denver and St. Louis, and is headquartered in New York.

"We try to be visible in the things that are taking place in those communities," said Elizabeth Brake, VFA director of Ohio. "When these ecosystem events are happening, we try to be visible and our fellows attend. The fellows are the best face of our [program]."

While VFA has no current plans to pursue launching in new places beyond those already in its portfolio, Elberger says it does have a list of places to watch.

What's definitely on the docket is increasing the connection VFA has within its current network. "We're looking to deepen our impact in the cities where we are already working by hiring community directors in each city, building out a local board and our network of advisors and mentors, encouraging fellows to start companies in VFA cities, and making sure we're sustaining cohorts of 10-15 fellows in each city every year," Elberger said.

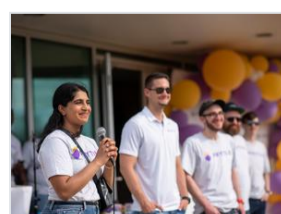
There's also a renewed laser-focus on equity in inclusion. "We are really set on [engaging] historically excluded groups," said Barrie Grinberg, director of community partnerships. "We strive to have gender parity and mimic the population in terms of the rest of the demographic. There's a lot more work to do, our number so far have made me really confident we can get there."

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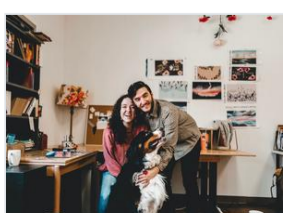
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