

## PREPARING FOR A CAREER IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE: WHAT TO READ, STUDY, AND DO

*By Mark Palermo*

Yes, it is true. Only a small percentage of initial applicants succeed at joining the Foreign Service each year. That begs the question, “What sets those successful candidates apart?”

The main hurdles in the hiring process are the Foreign Service Officer Test (FSOT), the Qualifications Evaluation Panel (QEP), and the Foreign Service Oral Assessment (FSOA). The FSOT is a general knowledge exam tailored for entrance to the Foreign Service. The QEP is an evaluation of a personal narrative and written responses to several questions designed to elicit more information about one’s suitability for this career. The FSOA is an assessment of a candidate’s capabilities in the so-called “13 Dimensions” deemed necessary to succeed in the Service: from composure and cultural adaptability to working with others and written communication.

Here are some tips based on what I learned from my own experience.

### **The Obvious**

*Education is key.* It does not matter what you studied or where you went to college (technically, it does not matter if you went to college at all), but to survive the exams and thrive in the career, you will need to have a broad academic foundation, intellectual curiosity, good study habits, and strong research and writing skills.

*Live overseas if you can.* In my A-100 class, 85 percent had previously lived overseas either for school, volunteer service, or work. Going abroad is a good gut-check for anyone thinking about a career in the Foreign Service, and provides ample anecdotes to demonstrate the 13 Dimensions.

*Know what you are getting into.* Review everything about joining the Foreign Service that is available on the State Department Web site. It really provides an excellent overview of the selection process and the career. Then follow up on some of the additional resources and references. The fact that you are reading this book is already a great sign!

*Prepare for the FSOT, QEP, and FSOA.* Take all the practice exams you can in order to get a feel for the content of the FSOT. I found a prep book for the high school Advanced Placement U.S. History test to be an especially helpful refresher. Try writing FSOT-like five-paragraph essays and FSOA-like case study memoranda under the relevant time constraints. Think of the QEP as a written version of the FSOA personal interview and, like the FSOA, prepare

for the QEP well before you are asked to do it. Read *The Economist* and the U.S. Constitution. Think of examples from your own experience that demonstrate the 13 Dimensions, and learn to deliver them as a quick “elevator pitch.”

### **What Might Surprise You**

*You do not need to know a foreign language.* You do not need to be fluent in any language other than English to enter the Foreign Service. The State Department will train you in languages as required. However, knowing a language certainly helps. Quite literally, a passing language score can boost your position on the hiring register.

*Prior work experience in foreign affairs is not necessary.* Before joining the Foreign Service, I was the chief operating officer of a commercial architecture firm. Among my A-100 classmates, recent careers included: stage drama director, design/color coordinator for animated television, full-time mom, coffee shop owner, real estate market analyst, tour guide company owner, town planner, IT professional, elementary school teacher, fishmonger, and freelance writer. While the vast majority of my classmates had lived overseas, less than 40 percent of us had any direct experience in traditional international affairs jobs.

*Life is the best experience.* The value of maturity may be reflected in the typical age of entry-level officers. Fully half of my classmates were in their 30s. Another 20 percent of us were 40 or older. Your nonprofessional experience is a rich trove of stories that can illustrate any or all of the 13 Dimensions and genuinely prepares you to deal with a career in the Foreign Service.

### **The Importance of Reaching Out**

*Your Foreign Service relationships start long before you enter.* The process of joining the Service can be grueling, and connecting with other people who are going through that process can help you maintain balance while you continue to live your current, “real” life. Reaching out through the Yahoo groups for the FSOT and FSOA, or attending study sessions and public information meetings, can help you prepare for the process and start friendships that will be valuable once you join the Service. Almost every member of an FSOA study group I was in is now in the Foreign Service, and several of us are still in touch.

*This is a family affair.* The Foreign Service is your career, but the life that comes with it has a profound impact on your loved ones. You will move every few years. You will miss some big family events and important milestones. Of course you will gain uniquely meaningful moments as well, but you need to talk with your family and friends about the tradeoffs. Do not be surprised if other people are not as excited as you are about your pursuit of this career. If they seem excited at first, do not be surprised if their disposition changes

once you are actually offered a place in A-100. That is particularly true if you have a partner and/or children. This is no ordinary job; your whole family has to commit to it, and you have to negotiate it with them.

*Last word: patience.* Some people move straight through the process on the first try, but it is not uncommon to find extraordinary officers who struggled to get hired. Many people do not pass the FSOT the first time through. During my first Oral Assessment I sat with someone who was taking her fifth FSOA (her perseverance paid off—she passed). Even if you survive the screening process, your candidacy is only valid for 18 months.

In years past, successful candidates far outnumbered hiring authorization, and thus many qualified applicants were not offered jobs. I was on my third candidacy before finally getting “the call,” an odyssey that lasted three-and-a-half years from the time I passed my first FSOT to when I started A-100.

In the end, I am actually glad it worked out that way. I was able to test my interest in the Foreign Service against myriad changing circumstances. My wife and I had two children, and my career was never better. Through it all, I remained committed to serving my country, and absolutely certain that the best place for me to do so was the U.S. Foreign Service.

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## A GUIDE TO STATE DEPARTMENT SPECIALIST (FSS) HIRING

Working alongside Foreign Service generalists are State Department Foreign Service specialists who provide a wide variety of management, administrative, technical, and healthcare services at overseas posts and in State Department offices in the United States. Specialist positions fall into seven major categories: Administration, Construction Engineering, Information Technology, International Information and English Language Programs, Medical and Health, Office Management, and Diplomatic Security.

The selection process is competitive. Positions for each specialist track are advertised separately online, and applications must be tied to particular openings. Descriptions of each career track, and tools for determining if one is a good fit, are on the State careers Web site at [www.careers.state.gov/specialist](http://www.careers.state.gov/specialist). Because specialist jobs open up at different times, some infrequently and only briefly, it is easy to miss an opportunity to apply. Once you have found a specialist track that looks like a good fit for your background, education, skills, and experience, it is a good idea to select