

US DIPLOMATIC STUDIES FOUNDATION

Valuing Education and Training in the State Department

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“State could do a lot to make itself more responsive, more agile, and more modern...It could focus more systematically on professional education, losing the conceit that diplomacy is a profession learned simply by osmosis, without doctrine or regular training.” - William Burns, Former Deputy Secretary of State (*The Atlantic*, May 4, 2020)

There is widespread recognition that the State Department requires major organizational reform. Its shortcomings are numerous. Meanwhile, the world is rapidly changing, supercharged by the information revolution, further exposing Department inadequacies. This makes it imperative that the administration and Congress work together to raise the Department’s performance to better serve America’s interests abroad and address the unique challenges of the 21st century. Foreign policy divisions are natural, but we should agree on having a first-rate department to represent America.

Inadequate Education and Training

One reform that the Department badly needs to undertake is improving the education and training of its personnel. Apart from language training, a typical Foreign Service Officer or Department civil servant receives scant formal professional development, measured in mere weeks over a potential career of several decades. The Department’s informal “apprentice model” of professional development differs considerably from sister government departments and agencies, including the CIA, FBI, and Defense Department, which invest substantial resources to make their employees better. Worsening matters, the State Department’s promotion structure is widely seen as *disincentivizing* employees from accessing the limited professional opportunities that do exist, as they are generally perceived as being career track diversions. By contrast, continuous and substantial formal professional development is a *sine quo non* of promotion in the U.S. military. Additionally, our competitors abroad, most notably China, invest considerably more than the U.S. in developing diplomatic excellence.

The State Department pays a price for shortchanging its workforce, denying employees access to cutting-edge management practices and other professional development exposure. Department morale is reportedly low, no doubt hurt by the Department’s poor investment in its people. The job market reveals this shortcoming as well. One report notes that Foreign Service applications have fallen to under 10,000 yearly, from a 31,000 high in 2003. This is a startling drop, especially given the global outlook of young people, and is a concerning judgment on the perceived value of a State Department career. This decline results in a less talented recruitment pool. World class organizations make education and training a top priority. The U.S. State Department never has. Its personnel, and U.S. diplomacy, deserve better.

Diplomacy Excellence Now More Than Ever

This deficiency in education and training is set against a growing sense that the U.S. needs to “reenergize” its diplomacy. A recent *Economist* article, in calling for fundamental Department improvements, recognized the importance of education and training: “*The State Department is*

lousy at [training]. Yet the skills diplomats need are only going to grow.” The “militarization” of U.S. foreign policy underscores the need to improve the performance, and perceptions, of the State Department. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the widely-disparate budgets of the Departments of Defense and State, have given the Pentagon a concerning position of primacy in formulating and executing U.S. policy, many believe. General James Mattis and former Defense Secretary Robert Gates are among many who have warned about the perils of Defense Department-led diplomacy. The education and training gap is part of the problem. An oral history released by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training puts it bluntly, “But speaking of things that you cannot talk about in the State Department today, strategic thinking is one of them. The military is brought up on strategy, tactics, and operations and nine out of ten Foreign Service officers have no blincken idea what you’re talking about.” State Department personnel badly need professional development to operate at this higher level. The Department must step up.

Advancing Diversity

Better professional development promises to improve the diversity of the State Department workforce, a broadly-supported goal. As expressed at a recent congressional hearing on increasing diversity, minority personnel within the Department are not equally exposed to the networks and mentoring needed to advance. Access to regular and rigorous professional education could help close opportunity gaps within the Department, building upon the successful Pickering and Rangel entry-level diversity-promotion programs.

Reform Agenda

Improved education and training should include:

- Instituting residential training, an important part of developing *esprit de corps*.
- Using graduate schools to supplement “in house” training.
- Establishing computer simulation and gaming, extensively utilized by the U.S. military.
- Employing more retired senior department leaders to teach courses at FSI.
- Increasing the quantity and quality of mandatory training courses and tying the courses to promotion.
- Offering more frequent opportunities for training with the interagency.

Significant and lasting education and training reform will require congressional authorization and healthy funding levels, including to allow for the Department to establish the “float” needed to rotate and train its people. Encouragingly, there have been signs lately of congressional engagement in Department operations. The Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee recently passed a State Department authorization bill, a positive step in the long-stalled authorization process for the Department. The bill emphasizes that, “The Department is a crucial national security agency, whose employees, both Foreign and Civil Service, require the best possible training at every stage of their careers to prepare them to promote and defend United States national interests and the health and safety of United States citizens abroad.” Congress is expected to build upon this in 2021. Robust education and training must be central to its effort if the United States is to meet its varied global challenges.