

Career Opportunities in Foreign Service

This guide is designed to provide very basic information about careers in the Foreign Service (FS) and point interested individuals to valuable resources that will answer more in-depth questions related to FS careers. It is especially designed to serve those who understand relatively little about the FS and are considering whether to invest time and energy in pursuing the lengthy and competitive application process.

Feel free to follow the footnotes for more detailed information about specific questions you may have. Keep in mind that despite our efforts to continually update this packet, the FS processes can change and information is often updated or modified. For a more comprehensive package of information about the Foreign Service, go to <http://careers.state.gov/officer/index.html>.

Description of the Field

- The Foreign Service is the federal government's first line of defense in safeguarding the security of the nation.^[1] Today, it is made up of approximately 11,000 Americans, one-third of them stationed in Washington, D.C. The other two-thirds of Foreign Service members work abroad, assisted by roughly 30,000 local employees. Foreign Service members work in five federal agencies:
 - State Department
 - U.S. Agency for International Development
 - Department of Commerce (Foreign Commercial Service)
 - Department of Agriculture (Foreign Agricultural Service)
 - International Broadcasting Bureau (Voice of America)

They may also be assigned one to three year tours in other federal agencies, such as the National Security Council, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and the Department of Defense.^[2]

The general work of the Foreign Service is best described in the Mission Statement of the Department of State: "Create a more secure, democratic, and prosperous world for the benefit of the American people and the international community."^[3] Of recent, three underlying and interdependent components embodied in the *National Security Strategy* make up the principal aims of the foreign policy objectives: diplomacy, development, and defense. While the FS is often perceived as focusing exclusively on "diplomacy," the other two components are also an important aspect of Foreign Service work.^[4]

Career Paths

"Through their dedication, perceptiveness, and creativity, Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) drive American foreign policy towards its objectives of promoting peace, stability, and prosperity."^[5] An FSO may follow one of five career tracks:^[6]

- Management Officer
- Consular Officer
- Economic Officer
- Political Officer
- Public Diplomacy Officer

New FS Officers receive orientation and training before being given their first assignment overseas. At least one of the first two assignments will likely include a “hardship post,” where living conditions are more difficult than in the United States. But the day-to-day activities of an FS Officer vary dramatically. For journal entries of “One day in the life of the Foreign Service,” see *Inside a U.S. Embassy*, pp. 56-83.

Is the Foreign Service right for you?

For any career, it is difficult to know the end from the beginning. This is so especially with the Foreign Service. Below are a list of a few personal questions to consider, followed by a general description of some of the general advantages and disadvantages of a FS career. A list of alternative career options is included in this section as well for those who would like to pursue a similar career path.

A. Questions to Consider^[7]

- Would I like to be the face of the United States in foreign countries? Am I willing to defend Foreign Policy?
- Do I love to travel? Would I like to live overseas?
- Do I have a family or plan to have a family? Would they like to live overseas?^[8]
- Am I interested in managing diplomatic relations with other countries and international institutions, promoting peace and stability, and addressing global challenges?
- Am I willing to live in dangerous circumstances and/or locations?
- How important is the overall compensation package for me (salary, benefits, and other overseas allowances)?^[9]
- Would I like to move every 1-3 years?

B. Advantages and Disadvantages

A Foreign Service career sounds adventurous, challenging, and thrilling—and in many ways FS Officers will agree that it is all of those things. If you care about U.S. Foreign Policy and the image of the United States overseas, you will likely have the opportunity to shape and implement such policy and enhance the U.S. image. If you are interested in learning new languages, becoming acquainted with new cultures, and meeting highly accomplished people from across the globe, you will likely have those chances. Furthermore, if you like the adventurous risk of living in a dangerous place, you may have one or more of those opportunities as well.

Although salary is generally perceived as one of the disadvantages of the FS career,^[10] the government provides a relatively comprehensive compensation package with good benefits (health, a savings plan, life insurance, annual leave, sick leave, student loan repayment program, and 10 paid holidays per year)^[11] and seeks to protect FS Officers and their families as much as possible.^[12]

There are notable disadvantages as well, however. Perhaps the first and most significant is the level of competition in getting into the FS.^[13] Another is the potential for being placed in insecure conditions, or simply undesirable assignments. Furthermore, as a representative of the U.S., you will be required to publicly defend U.S. foreign policy. Constant travel and living overseas can be viewed as either an advantage or disadvantage, depending on family circumstances and priorities.^[14]

C. Alternative Career Options^[15]

- US Government Civil Service^[16]
- A social justice advocacy group (domestic or international)^[17]
- The Peace Corps
- Multilateral International Agencies (World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO)
- International for-profit consulting firms^[18]
- Nonprofit Organizations and NGOs (Care, Mercy Corps, and Africare)

Application Process^[19]

In 2007, the Department of State changed its hiring practices. Applicants now begin with a two-part registration process, followed by a computer based "Foreign Service Officer Test." The test, expected to be given in mid-summer, will cover three sections: English Expression, Job Knowledge, and Biographic Questionnaire. Candidates taking the test will also be required to write an essay. Both a passing test score and competitive essay enable the candidate to have his or her application reviewed by the Qualifications Evaluation Panel. The Panel reviews the candidate's application, narrative responses, and test score using guidelines based on actual FS work, and selects candidates to move on to the final part of the application process: the FS Oral Assessment.

The Foreign Service Oral Assessment is a day-long exam that assesses your knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal qualities. The oral exam now includes Management Case Studies as well.^[20]

Upon successfully passing the Oral Assessment, you will be asked to submit detailed information for security medical clearance.

After the background information is completed, a Final Review Panel will review the completed file and determine whether you are suitable for employment with the FS.^[21]

Note: If you are interested in learning more about the Foreign Service, go to <http://careers.state.gov/officer/index.html> for more detailed answers to the above questions, and other questions you may have.

^[1] See "Inside a U.S. Embassy," CAS Library, p. 2.

^[2] Ibid, pp. 2-3.

^[3] See "U.S. Department of State" website under "Mission," <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23503.htm>.

^[4] See Department of State "Mission" <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23503.htm>; and Organizational Chart, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/rls/dos/54734.htm>>. |

^[5] See *Careers Representing America*, "What does a Foreign Officer Do?" <http://careers.state.gov/officer/roles/index.html>.

^[6] See *Ibid* for a specific understanding of each track.

^[7] For more questions to consider, and a compatibility tool to see if you would enjoy the Foreign Service, go to <http://careers.state.gov/officer/fsright/index.html>.

^[8] For more information on the Foreign Service and your family, go to <http://careers.state.gov/officer/fsright/index.html> and click on "Family Liason Office Flash

Movie.”

[9] See “Benefits of Foreign Service Officers,”

<http://careers.state.gov/officer/benefits/index.html>.

[10] See “Salary Determination” <http://careers.state.gov/officer/benefits/index.html#salary>.

[11] See “Benefits,” <http://careers.state.gov/officer/benefits/index.html>.

[12] See CAS packet “Section Two: Orientation, Assignments, Training Pay and Benefits for Foreign Service Generalists and Specialists.”

[13] See next section for application process.

[14] See CAS packet “Section Four: The Foreign Service and Your Family”

[15] See *Working for Change*, Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, Kumarian Press (2005), pp. 113-130 in CAS library.

[16] Through the Presidential Management Fellowship or another entry-level program

[17] See “Social Justice” Career Field Guide.

[18] See Career Field Guide, “International Consulting” (CAS Library)

[19] For more details, go to the following link:

<http://www.careers.state.gov/news/index.html>, then click on “Our Foreign Officer Section Process has changed,” and then “The Foreign Service Officer Selection Process.”

[20] For a detailed description of the Oral Assessment Process, see “Oral Assessment Summary,” <http://careers.state.gov/officer/assess/index.html>.

[21] See Foreign Service Exam Materials in the CAS Library.