

Thumbnail Image:



May 02, 2018 by **Conrad Turner**

Want to Join the Foreign Service? Prepare Now. ^[1]

Public diplomacy students often ask me if I think now is a good time to join the Foreign Service. The answer is, “Of course.” The next question is trickier: how does one get in? The usual uninspiring response is, “Take the annual Foreign Service test.” But there are many ways to get a foot in the door and gain precious experience while trying to land a permanent career.

Chief among them is to be both stubborn and patient. I’m convinced that if you watch for opportunities, bust your butt, and are willing to do just about any kind of work to get in, you’ll succeed. That’s how I did it. You may have to temporarily park your higher degree, but everything in this career requires a long-term view.

So getting in isn’t really the issue. It’s being effective once you’re there and finding ways to enjoy your job so you don’t burn out. It’s also standing out from the Foreign Service mob to

get promoted and stay employed.

Accordingly—this being the era of lists—here are my top six things to do now as a student that will pay off for you later, once you’ve been sworn in:

1. **Learn.** Learn anything and everything. Whatever you learn, you will use it in a PD career, in one way or another. I’m not talking about diplomacy or foreign policy—you’re already cramming that into your brain. Instead, read books on science. Literature. Philosophy. Vegan cooking. Teach yourself to dance or play an exotic instrument. Indulge your inner renaissance person. And don’t kid yourself you’re learning lots from articles or videos, they go through you like prunes. Instead, immerse yourself in topics and hobbies. Volunteer somewhere. Go deep—that’s where value is.

2. **Learn a language.** I mean really *learn* it. Get good and have fun with the accent and memorize popular sayings or poetry. Maybe that’s easy for me to say, since I’ve done it. But you want to be a public diplomat, right? Now, you don’t need to be completely fluent to draw a paycheck—you might get by, depending on your job. But if you want to do good things and win people over and like your work and stand out, then get comfortable in a foreign language. If you learn the right “hard” language, you can parlay it into many assignments, develop regional expertise, and earn more money. I’m thinking Chinese, Arabic or Russian. Still, if French or Spanish or Hungarian is your thing, go for it.

3. **Cultivate the light side of the force:** practice being a nice person. If you can’t, please find another career. The world has enough stiff, distant, even unfriendly bureaucrats. Americans need to be different. A foreign national colleague once told me, “Americans are known to be efficient with no interest in anything except work.” Others note how some of us pass them in the hallway without saying hello. Really? Folks, this is Humanity 101. Cultivate the niceness they taught you in kindergarten. If nothing else, it will come in handy later, when you go asking for 360 evaluations and people decide if they’d want to work with you again... Also the quickest way to get thrown out while you’re untenured is to be a jerk.

You don’t need to wait three years until your first PD tour to start: you can practice now.

4. **Beat your smartphone addiction.** There’s nothing more annoying to a contact or boss (or professor) than to be talking to people who can’t stop checking their phones. You say everyone’s doing it? Well they’re not. You’ll be working in countries where people still go to cafes to converse, not write reports or status updates or check their mail. In any case, I don’t care what others at the table are doing when you get there: *be the one who is fully present*. This is how you get diplomacy done where others fail. Fight the addiction now.

5. **Go beyond your syllabus,** job description and other forms of conventional wisdom. Remember that one project you did in school or college that nobody asked you to do, but you thought it would be interesting and fun and worthwhile and others benefited? That, in a nutshell, is the ideal of public service. The policymakers tell us what the goals are, but we use our brains and internal compasses to find the best way to do it. We take initiative and help others pursue their ideas. You don’t need to wait three years until your first PD tour to start: you can practice now. What might that be at your university? Damned if I can tell you.

Campuses are huge with tons of committees and clubs and problems that you care about that need fixing and undergrads who need tutors. You have skills and just may be the person to help out.

6. Learn to write. Sorry to sound condescending, but I'll put it this way: professors and senior diplomats have noticed that writing skills haven't exactly improved over the decades. Writing well gives you influence in the State Department, its embassies, and in foreign countries. It is also how you get promoted past people who don't write well. Writing is a learned skill, but you have to write to learn. So write.

Those are just a few things you can double down on today. There are many others. For example, most people are lousy public speakers. So join Toastmasters. I'm totally not kidding. It's first-rate experience, and you'll be addressing audiences nonstop as a PD officer.

Also stay healthy; you can't be a strong student, let alone travel as a diplomat around countries on packed schedules, if you are physically and emotionally unwell. And be ethical: integrity is the bottom line for public service and governs everything from administration and leadership to policy implementation.

The main thing is to prepare now so that, once you are assigned to represent the American people overseas, you will be one of our finest examples—and you'll be ready to find real enjoyment in the best career ever invented.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *The opinions represented here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. government. For more information on public diplomacy careers with the U.S. Department of State, visit careers.state.gov.*

Photo: Conrad Turner speaks with USC Master of Public Diplomacy candidates.
