

Personal Narratives

1) The Foreign Service seeks a diverse workforce with broad job skills and a depth of experience to represent the United States overseas. Briefly describe why you would like to work with the State Department and what you bring to the Consular Fellows Program.

My intentions are to learn firsthand how our State Department works while utilizing my Chinese-Mandarin speaking skills. I seek an avenue to the frontlines of U.S.-China relations and your Consular Fellows Program is exactly that. I will draw upon a Peace Corps China tempered understanding of Chinese culture during my time as a Fellow. The prospect of serving both American and Chinese people abroad, revisiting a vibrant culture that I love, and recycling my language skills in a directly impactful way at one of our consulates is exciting to me.

2) In the Foreign Service, you will confront challenging situations that require identifying a problem, collecting relevant information, and formulating or advancing innovative solutions to resolve the problem. Describe a time when you responded innovatively to unanticipated circumstances to solve a problem.

During my first day studying abroad in Tanzania I saw a man walking around with his right eyeball half popping out of his head. From prior research I knew that these indigenous Maasai people were suffering from new diseases because of a recent shift in their culture – from subsisting mainly on vitamin-rich cattle products to subsistence farming – but I had never imagined what experiencing this firsthand would feel like.

In the name of conservation they had been forced off their traditional grazing corridors, like the Serengeti, and quartered into narrower dusty savannah lands. To adapt they had begun eating less red meat, farming maize, and producing their new main food source *ugali* from the flour. This was the problem I was examining. My aim became to survey daily vitamin-A intake by Maasai women and to formulate solutions to this food security crisis.

Over the next month I interviewed dozens of Maasai women and came to the conclusion that, indeed, their daily diets reflected a deficiency in vitamin-A. One solution I proposed was to genetically modify maize crops in the region to express vitamin-A, reinforcing them with that vital nutrient. Over time, this would directly lead to less and less cases of vitamin-A deficiency among the Maasai people in Tanzania.

3) In the Foreign Service, you will be called upon to interact effectively and diplomatically with people in difficult situations. Describe how you have used your interpersonal skills in a specific situation to resolve a problem or achieve a goal.

As a street outreach counselor for young people experiencing homelessness in Denver I faced many situations that required delicate responses. Clients with layers of trauma in their lives would come in for breakfast after a night of sleeping outside. Part of my job was to make these young adults feel comfortable while tactfully preventing or de-escalating any incidents that arose.

One day a twenty-year-old who went by the street moniker “Crazy White Boy” came in lightly arguing with another client. I separated the two and gave them each a breakfast burrito. About ten minutes later I heard yelling from one corner of the room. I ran over to investigate, putting myself between the two fighters – Crazy White Boy and another client.

The client was bleeding from a stab wound on his shoulder. I looked at Crazy White Boy and he was red face leering into my eyes with a white-knuckle grip on a dark dripping knife. Very calmly I took a step back and commanded the crowd to move the tables and dissolve the breakfast line – this created space for Crazy White

Boy to exit through the front door. Without breaking eye contact I told him to go out right away and he did so. This promptly allowed us to care for the bleeding client and contact law enforcement, effectively resolving the crisis.

4) Communication skills are critical to successful diplomacy. Describe a situation in which you used your communication skills (either in English or another language) to further an aim or achieve a goal.

In Skagway, Alaska I staffed a National Park information desk that greeted over one thousand visitors from around the world every day. My job was to provide information and customer service to visitors in English and also in Chinese-Mandarin.

One day a distraught man of Asian-descent approached the desk, speaking very heavily in a Chinese dialect that I was unfamiliar with. I talked with the man using standard Chinese-Mandarin, asking how I could help him. He was there alone and trying to find something to do. I told him about all the free activities our National Park offered, but he seemed to grow even more frantic. He kept repeating a Chinese word over and over again that I did not know. He was saying “bingchuan.” I racked my brain to understand his meaning.

My thought process was, “he is saying bing... what does bing mean? Well it could mean ‘ice’... what about chuan?... perhaps he meant ‘river?’ So, ice river... what is an ice river? Well, it’s a glacier. Alaska has a lot of those.” In those few seconds I knew what he meant. He was trying to find glaciers. I promptly told him I understood his meaning and gave him information about how to reach a nearby glacier. It was clear that he was no longer distraught and he went merrily on his way.

5) Foreign Service Officers are often required to manage projects, demonstrating the ability to plan and organize, set priorities, employ a systematic approach, and allocate time and resources efficiently. Describe a project you managed or helped to manage and how you sought to achieve the project’s goals.

While employed as a camp Traveling Director I ran a program called “Bridging Borders.” The goal of this program was to take a group of high-school aged students and their teachers to Mexico to build a house for a family in need. We allotted three days to do this, so I coordinated with an organization called Casas por Cristo that specialized in building simple stucco houses.

I was responsible for organizing this group, driving them across the border to Juarez, cooking them food, and managing day-to-day logistics of the project. Up at dawn, eat, go work during the morning, break for lunch, afternoon break during the heat of the day, back to work in the late afternoon. Following this schedule we completed the house on time.

The second day of construction, however, we had a snag that forced me to adapt my plans. One of my students, a high school senior, turned pale and quiet by mid-afternoon. I had him take longer breaks and drink liters of water. He appeared to get worse. So I delegated an adult to supervise the group while I took the student back across the U.S. border to a hospital in El Paso. Doctors gave him an IV drip and he quickly recovered. Part of managing people is acknowledging that unexpected things happen and being ready to adapt in order stay on track.

6) Leadership can be defined as motivating others, encouraging creative solutions, establishing positive team relationships, or significantly influencing the direction of the work. Describe how you have demonstrated leadership, either on one particular occasion or over time.

During the Peace Corps I spent a lot of time getting to know the other 150 Americans volunteering with me in China. After our pre-service training I was nominated by them to lead a support group. I was tasked with checking in on volunteers, editing a monthly mental health newsletter, and facilitating training events in Chengdu. I designed a training that established positive relationships between volunteers through an activity I called Touch Someone Who.

The idea was to have everyone sit in a large circle, number people off into smaller groups, and have these smaller groups stand up and go to the center of the circle. Everyone still sitting was instructed to close his or her eyes and listen to calming music. I then prompted the small group in the center to walk around and “touch someone who... you want to get to know better,” or to “touch someone who... you think is really funny.”

This simple activity not only gave volunteers validation from their peers, but also addressed the issue of isolation that many feel at their sites. It was designed to invoke positive feelings that volunteers could carry back with them as they returned to their service, typically far from any other volunteer. Good leaders refuel people with positive energy and this activity achieved that.