



CAREER TALK

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**Interviews conducted
by “Careers, Cultures,
& Languages” students**



BARBARA DELEO

Barbara DeLeo has over 19 years of experience as a Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State. She received a B.A. from Mercyhurst University and an M.A. from Brock University in Canada. She is currently studying Azeri at the Internal Center for Language Studies (ICLS) before her next assignment.

1) What does your day-to-day work look like as a Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State? Do you have a specialization?

My area of specialization is in the political cone in the foreign service, also referred to as a Foreign Service Officer or a diplomat. We also have the consular, economic, management, and public affairs cones. There is some cross over between cones, but usually people like their area of specialization and stick with that area.

2) Could you explain your educational/career background and what motivated you to become a Foreign Service Officer?

It was all a bit of an accident... I went to Mercyhurst College (now University) in Erie, PA as a pre-med major because I wanted to become a veterinarian. During my freshman year, I decided that I hated chemistry and that I wasn't sure I wanted to be on call for animals, so I was at cross-roads in my life. I thought about the classes I had enjoyed and my other interests. I had done well in my intro to political science course, and I love languages and foreign cultures, so I changed majors to political science. Even then, I didn't know where this decision to change my major would take me. During my sophomore year, a professor of foreign affairs suggested to me that I should consider taking the

the Foreign Service Exam. I had never heard of the Foreign Service Exam. He told me that he thought I would be a great fit for the field of diplomacy, and I decided this was a great goal for me.

I took the Foreign Service Exam for the first time after completing my B.A. but didn't do well enough on the multiple choice to even have my essays graded, let alone be invited for the oral portion. After undergrad, I did a year-long certificate in organizational management, also at Mercyhurst, as I awaited graduate school answers. I applied to schools with terminal M.A. programs in international relations, as I didn't want to focus on a Ph.D. and academia. So, I applied to Pitt, American, McMaster (in Canada) and Brock University in Canada. Brock gave me a fellowship and the opportunity to be a teaching assistant and it seemed like a no brainer, so I went off to Canada. After completing my M.A., I applied to many places, but had a hard time finding a job. I was nervous about taking the foreign service exam again, so I put it off for a bit. As I learned I was highly educated and under qualified, I decided it was time to take the foreign service exam again and this time I made it through and after my background check was completed, I got the job offer.

3) What is your favorite part about your position?

After over 19 years in the job, I still like the people I get to meet the best. I enjoy both the foreigners and my American colleagues and think that the human capacity to understand others is the best thing going.

4) You recently started learning Azeri, why is learning this language specifically important for the work you do?

My next assignment is to Baku, Azerbaijan. Depending on the country and the level of English spoken by the general population, Foreign Service Officers are required to learn the host country language to better communicate with colleagues in the local government. I learned Turkish in

2005-2006, which gives me a strong basis for learning Azerbaijani, which is a Turkic language. For diplomacy, the more you understand the local culture, including the language, the better off you are and can be more successful in accomplishing the diplomatic mission.

5) What embassies, consulates, or other diplomatic missions have you served at?

I have served in Irbil, Iraq; Istanbul, Turkey; the US Mission to the UN; Athens, Greece; Nicosia, Cyprus; and Baghdad, Iraq.

6) What advice would you give to someone who is interested in diplomacy and public service?

Follow your interests and don't give up. The foreign service exam is free! So, take it and see what happens. I have known people who have taken the test many times before getting into the Department of State. Other people do this as a second career, so if you happen to do something else first, you can always apply later in life. There are many paths into public service and the government, keep trying different routes, if this is what interests you.

The interview was conducted by Madeline Cech.