

Testimony of
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International Operations, and Bilateral International Development
on
Training the Department of State's Workforce for 21st-Century Diplomacy
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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Hagerty, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to testify today. I am honored to be able to share my perspective on **“Training the Department of State’s Workforce for 21st-Century Diplomacy.”** I offer my views solely in my capacity as a private citizen, representing no other organization, particularly not the Department of Defense, where I had the privilege to serve as a civilian for more than a decade. However, the observations and proposals I will share today are informed by my experience leading the Defense Innovation Board, and several DoD and federal-wide projects related to human capital, professional development, and organizational change -- both in the government and in collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service. In addition, I have established or served as an advisor to multiple nonprofit organizations devoted to developing emerging global leaders. These non-governmental organizations have afforded me the opportunity to receive the unfiltered views of hundreds of public servants, quite a few of them from the Department of State. While I do not purport to speak for anyone else, I will endeavor to do justice to them and their experiences.

I also must begin by acknowledging that unlike the distinguished ambassadors who have served as witnesses, I have never had the honor of serving in the State Department. While my views are informed by and in harmony with studies on foreign service modernization such as the insightful report by my fellow witness, [Revitalizing State—Closing the Educational Gap](#)¹, and that of my colleagues at the Truman National Security Project, [Transforming the State Department into a More Just, Equitable, and Innovative Institution](#),² I can only offer the impressions of a well-intentioned outsider. I offer these comments humbly in the spirit of collaboration.

The State Department has developed many inspiring leaders who have tackled the world’s most complex geopolitical and humanitarian problems -- often prevailing against the odds, leading in ambiguity, toiling in obscurity, rarely with adequate resources, and often in harm’s way. Many of our diplomats and civil servants are quick learners, resourceful, and resilient. **At their finest,**

¹ David C. Miller, Thomas Pickering, and Rand Beers. (2021). [Revitalizing State—Closing the Educational Gap](#).

² Truman Center for National Policy (2021). [Transforming the State Department into a More Just, Equitable, and Innovative Institution](#).

there is no tool of foreign relations more powerful than the skill, integrity, versatility, and resolve of America's diplomats.

Yet, fewer and fewer of the State personnel with whom I spoke believe these qualities are the norm. Fewer of them seem to believe State's best days are ahead of them. Many describe an organization that, to them, feels rigid, hierarchical, parochial, and risk-averse; a culture that is nostalgic and stagnating; leaders who are anxious; employees who are disengaged.

The truth is surely more nuanced; for example, State's Federal Employee Viewpoint Scores (FEVS) showed a slight improvement in satisfaction this year.³ Nevertheless, **now is the moment for a cultural renewal in our State Department workforce.** Like so many of our government institutions, the overall pace of adaptation has slowed, while all around us the pace of change appears to be accelerating. General C.Q. Brown, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force recently said to his workforce, "*accelerate change or lose.*" That is an example of what urgency feels like.

In the last two years, the State workforce has faced a global pandemic, cyber attack, climate crises, global supply chain shocks, humanitarian emergencies in every region, on top of escalating great power competition and unhelpful politicization of its non-partisan role. To meet these challenges, we need to accept three premises, each of which I will discuss briefly:

- First, modernizing training alone is inadequate; a holistic approach is needed to foster a State Department culture fit for the 21st Century. Improving training and education are a crucial lever to pull, along with others.
- Second, the aforementioned global challenges require new paradigms of foreign service, necessitating a relook at curriculum content, not just delivery mechanisms. State has begun this, but there is probably more to be done.
- Third, the delivery mechanisms for training will require a significant overhaul rather than incremental improvements. The dominant modes of education, training, and professional development have changed radically in the commercial world and even in academia, and so too must they evolve in the Federal Government generally and State specifically.

I believe that all three of these foundational observations are true of the Department of Defense as well. In some cases, DoD has recognized this and made progress, though much remains to be done. Where possible, I hope to suggest some lessons by analogy.

Part 1: Creating a Learning Culture at State

Peter Drucker, the late legendary management consultant, is known for the adage, "*culture eats strategy for breakfast.*" Had Drucker been invited to testify today he would have gone on to say

³ https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/21-STATE-44024.eml_-1.pdf

that **culture also eats training for a mid-morning snack**. By this I mean that when we take State employees out of their work environment, their leadership chain, their promotion incentives, and other explicit norms and unconscious biases, and put them in a training classroom, very little that happens in that classroom will survive once they return. To prepare State's workforce for 21st Century Diplomacy absolutely depends on modernizing training -- which is important -- but we must look beyond that problem framing to explore the State Department's culture, and ask ourselves *how might State Department leaders intentionally construct a learning culture?* Or put another way, how could State become a Learning Organization?

“Learning Organization” is a term defined by management theorist Peter Senge in his bestseller *The Fifth Discipline* as **a group of people working together collectively to enhance their capacities to create results they really care about**.⁴ Learning Organizations can be large bureaucracies, but they take on some of the qualities of startups: they are constantly sensing their environment, conducting small experiments, and adapting how they operate. They place a premium on **learning** and **curiosity** as core organizational and individual values. Whereas some organizations optimize for execution and efficiency, Learning Organizations also emphasize discovery, agility, and evolution. Gen. Stan McChrystal writes about this beautifully in his book *Team of Teams*,⁵ chronicling how Joint Special Operations Command had to rapidly evolve in response to Al Qaeda.

Learning Organizations are known for innovation. They tend to grant managers greater autonomy, and -- as Harvard psychologist Amy Edmonson has researched for decades -- their managers give their employees a sense of psychological safety.⁶ Edmonson defined team psychological safety as a *“a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”* That is to say that teammates feel comfortable disagreeing and debating, respectfully challenging assumptions, asking for help, and believe that failures are opportunities for learning and growth. Wharton professor Adam Grant, who incidentally co-lead the Workforce Subcommittee of the Defense Innovation Board, has pointed out that psychological safety is essentially a **necessary precursor for innovation**.

Employees are freed up from worry about saving face or getting credit to focus on the mission. Learning organizations encourage employees to have what Carol Dweck described as a growth mindset.⁷ They are rewarded not only for excellence, effort, or time-in-grade, but for curiosity, intrapreneurship, and adaptation. When the Subcommittee asks how we can prepare the State

⁴ Peter M. Senge (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Random House Books.

⁵ Stanley A. McChrystal, Tatum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell (2015). *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*. Portfolio.

⁶ Amy Edmondson (2018). *The Fearless Organization*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁷ Carol Dweck (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books.

Department workforce for the 21 st Century, the answer is not by improving training alone, but by challenging the leadership of the State Department to undertake a coordinated campaign to turn the State Department into a Learning Organization.

Cultures take time to change; it takes time and sustained involvement from leadership, which is why bipartisan congressional support is essential. I recommend that State's leadership should consider three specific actions as part of that campaign:

First, ask the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources to establish a State Department Chief Learning Officer (CLO) with a small team under her or him to work continuously to promote this agenda. (This individual should not be the Director of the Foreign Service Institute.) The Navy was the first service to establish a CLO, and hired John Kroger, the former president of Reed College for the post. Kroger's experience was not without challenges,⁸ and the whole premise of establishing CXOs to solve organizational problems justifiably has its critics, but in government, naming an individual tends to concentrate attention, resources, and accountability. So this is a good start, and would certainly signal a recognition of the problem.

Next, the State Department should designate an individual to be responsible for learning and training at every bureau and embassy. These individuals should be organized into a network on platforms (such as Slack) that can exchange observations, share resources, and provide mutual support in real time. DoD has a DoD Chief Learning Officers Council (DCLOC) led by an OSD CLO -- admittedly not at the right level of seniority -- but it's a start. Naming individuals in many operating units is crucially important because learning is not something that happens only in a classroom at the Foreign Service Institute. Learning -- and training -- must happen on the job, on the frontlines, in the core of the work, and therefore become embedded in culture and in practice.

Second, the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources should look hard at the USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. Having an organization dedicated to Learning has -- by all accounts I have heard -- served USAID quite well. This team has a dynamic initiative called Continuous Learning and Adaptation (CLA), and they invest strategically in data collection and analysis, operate an excellent website called USAID Learning Lab⁹ for sharing best practices, and work assiduously to promote evidence-based practices and decision making. Expanding this effort State-wide would make a lot of sense; I suspect the function could be embedded under the Under Secretary for Management.

Third, the State Department should aggressively pursue diverse outside perspectives. Welcoming outside views and external benchmarking are essential to challenging status quo

⁸ <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-office-life-at-the-pentagon-is-disconcertingly-retrograde/>

⁹ <https://usaidlearninglab.org/>

thinking and stoking creativity. One thing that has had a dramatically positive effect on the DoD was the establishment of a robust Defense Innovation Board in 2016, which enjoyed bipartisan support from both the Obama and Trump administrations. Perhaps the State Department should explore creating its own version—a Diplomacy Innovation Board - that would provide independent, pathbreaking recommendations to encourage innovative best practices throughout the Department, especially from industry. The State Department has nineteen advisory committees, but really none that serve this purpose.

Part 2: Embracing New Paradigms of Foreign Service

A common critique leveled against the military is that it trains to fight the last war; or a corollary critique: it prepares for the wars it wants to fight. In a similar vein, the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) is optimized for foreign service officers, and often led by previous generations of FSOs, so it is likely to be shaped by both the benefits *and constraints* of past experience. There are roles and functions for which FSI likely remains ideal, but there are new roles and functions for which it must adapt. In the same way, the U.S. Army is still the best in the world at training infantry and artillery, but it is today struggling to train product managers and data analysts. Further, a growing body of curriculum needs to be overhauled. I experienced this working with the Eisenhower School at the National Defense University and the Defense Acquisition University, which is responsible for defense industry studies and acquisition training respectively. Given the radical disruption of the defense industry in the last decade, it's immensely challenging for faculty and curriculum to keep pace, even with leadership clamoring for it.

To embrace new paradigms, I offer five recommendations:

First, as my fellow panelist Ambassador David Miller has written, **the State Department should prioritize conducting an analysis of what competencies to prioritize at the early, middle, and senior career levels and a gap analysis** to assess State's current approach.¹⁰ Following such an assessment should be the revision of courses administered at the early, mid-, and senior career levels. Assessments should also provide a justification for providing the authorities and funding needed to make a meaningful human capital investment.

It's equally important **not to rely solely on a single assessment at a moment in time**, but to build in a robust capacity to respond to emergent needs and for curriculum rapidly. This is often best accommodated by combining in-house instruction with a robust network of outside commercial and university training and education providers.

Second, the State Department should embrace competencies that are optimized for digital transformation and increasing uncertainty. When the Defense Innovation Board's Workforce

¹⁰ David C. Miller, Thomas Pickering, and Rand Beers. (2021). [Revitalizing State—Closing the Educational Gap](#).

& Culture subcommittee was conducting assessment of 21st skills for DoD to prioritize, they recommended five focus areas for DoD: **Design Thinking, Lean Startup, Agile Software Development, Data Science, and Innovation Management**. Subsequent reports emphasized **machine learning and artificial intelligence**. These are the 21st century skills modern organizations need to embrace digital technologies and develop the adaptive capacities of Learning Organizations.

Several DoD organizations have had notable successes importing these types of methodologies from academia and industry, such as NavalX, CyberWorks, AFWERX, National Security Innovation Network, and Air Force Kessel Run. Often these efforts are undertaken in a familiar pattern: a defense organization pilots a new-to-DoD curriculum from a proven commercial vendor or university, eventually undertakes a train-the-trainer approach to build instructional capacity in-house, scales the offering of the curriculum to a wider network. The missing final stage is embedding the new curriculum into existing educational institutions inside the Department.

A notable success story is the NSF I-Corps curriculum developed by the National Science Foundation, inspired by the Lean Startup methodology pioneered by Professor Steve Blank at Stanford University.¹¹ The I-Corps curriculum is now taught widely to the federal labs to commercialize federally funded scientific discoveries. It has since been effectively adapted by the Intelligence Community to teach Lean Startup principles for solving national security problems. Based on the I-Corps curriculum taught to entrepreneurs and scientists, a foundation called the Common Mission Project supports the **Hacking 4 Defense (H4D)** program now offered at more than 50 universities in four countries. The National Security Innovation Network -- a program of the Defense Innovation Unit -- supports H4D financially and programmatically and worked closely with the I-Corps founders to make this national program a true public-private partnership with DoD. There was a single iteration of **Hacking 4 Diplomacy** course offered at Stanford University in 2016, but without an empowered partner at the State Department, Hacking 4 Diplomacy didn't catch on. The State Department needs a lot more I-Corps, H4D, and similar non-traditional curriculum.

Third, the State Department should increase its collaboration with training providers outside of government to increase the diversity and agility of educational offerings. Much of the resources and experience to draw upon exist outside of government today, and it's faster, cheaper, and better not to immediately jump to building internally what can be a blended approach.

When I was setting up a program in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy that we called Policy University -- admittedly named with a touch of irony -- we did annual surveys

¹¹ https://www.nsf.gov/news/special_reports/i-corps/resources.jsp

of leaders, managers, and employees to set learning objectives and then outsourced modular curricula based on needs. Our data showed that this drove costs down, increased flexibility, increased employees' use of the professional development resources, and also employees reported greater satisfaction with the learning offerings. While the evidence was anecdotal, we believe this drove improved performance and satisfaction.

A particularly effective example of this is the work of a company called Dcode that specializes in helping commercial technology companies sell products and services to government agencies. Reverse engineering that business model, Dcode established they could also effectively instruct DoD leaders to promote innovation in their organizational cultures and to be more savvy consumers of digital products and services. After several years of iteration with defense and IC customers, AFWERX just awarded a 5-year contract to Dcode for their educational services, which I regard as a victory for the Air Force.

Fourth, the State Department should support homegrown innovation efforts. When I served in government, I was aware of two impactful grassroots initiatives at State to promote this kind of work: *The Collaboratory* in the Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs, and *The Strategy Lab* in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. The Collaboratory applied innovative approaches to support and enhance State's educational, cultural and professional exchange programs. The Strategy Lab focused on applying techniques from the private sector to facilitate creative problem solving and original thinking about foreign policy and security challenges. The founder of the Strategy Lab, Zvika Krieger, and I worked together in DoD to pioneer this model during his time working under former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter. The Strategy Lab did not survive, and the work of The Collaboratory has migrated to other parts of State, possibly due to budgetary constraints or changing bureau priorities. I believe these are both examples of the type of efforts that should be receiving more support and attention, not less.

Fifth, the State Department should work to bring more perspectives in from outside, even if temporarily. They do more to train the workforce through on-the-job collaboration and exposure to new ideas than any executive education course ever could. This should include a variety of bi-directional exchanges with more State Department employees spending time in rotational assignments outside of State such as DoD's exceptional DoD ventures program where mid-career officers spend 6 weeks at venture capital firms and startups, or its Education with Industry programs such as SecDef Executive Fellows.

In the other direction, **State needs to open up many ways for Americans at the pinnacles of their careers fields to join our diplomacy efforts.** A lack of robust lateral pathways into the State Department hinders its ability to bring in fresh perspectives to tackle a set of problems that increasingly require diverse skills and perspectives to solve, especially industry and academic personnel. This is especially true at the mid-career level.

For example, **it is time for the State Department to establish its own State Digital Service.** To thrive in an increasingly digital strategic environment, the State Department should follow the path of the U.S. Digital Service and GSA’s Technology Transformation Services. DoD faced a similar challenge, and in 2016, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter stood up the Defense Digital Service (DDS). We now know that having a dedicated team of public servants—software developers, engineers, data scientists, designers, and product managers—who serve as a self-described “SWAT team of nerds” significantly increases the technical capacity of the Department to respond to urgent priorities with sophisticated digital solutions. These teams are radically different from and complementary to enterprise IT functions.

By strategically leveraging fellowships, the State Department could bring in subject matter expertise in areas where the State Department needs it the most, using expanded Schedule A and B direct hiring authorities. These could take the form of existing fellowships such as the Presidential Innovation Fellowships, AAAS fellowships, Intergovernmental Personnel Act detailees, and the newly-created Digital Corps. The State Department should create Executive-in-Residence and Entrepreneurship-in-Residence programs in key topical areas such as data science, cybersecurity, and sustainability. Offering these programs would directly expand the scope of expertise within the State Department.

Part 3: Adopting New Delivery Mechanisms for Training

Today, the universe of digital learning opportunities and tools have exploded. There are more ways than ever to deliver rich, multimedia, interactive content to a globally distributed user base such as the State workforce. They are all mobile, social, and on-demand. More than that, in response to COVID-19 we have proven that platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom can be used to expand in-person, human-to-human educational experiences to virtual. These technologies come in essentially four flavors:

- Vast, publicly accessible platforms like Coursera, Udemy, and edX that offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that empower individuals to drive the learning experience.
- Enterprise upskilling platforms like NovoEd, Canvas, and Guild that empower employers to drive the learning experience.
- Nimble, interactive self-paced educational technology apps and micro-learning platforms that can also deliver measurable gains in technical disciplines such as PluralSight and Code Academy.
- The emerging frontier of these technologies are Live Virtual Constructive (LVC) environments in which individuals can use avatars in multiplayer simulated gaming environments that are very realistic. Companies like Praxis Labs are using inexpensive Augmented Reality / Virtual Reality (AR/VR) goggles to allow adult learners to

experience these simulations incredibly vividly at home. With new computer-based simulations, games could be conducted both synchronously and asynchronously.¹² Using both in-person experiences and distance learning, the State Department could create a cadre of Foreign Service Officers that practiced using the tools available to them *before* needing them.

To take advantage of new training techniques, I have two recommendations:

First, the State Department should increase the use of exercises, simulations, and experiments. DoD makes extensive use of tactical, operational, and strategic exercises for training and education; concept development and analyses; requirements definition and technology testing; and operational rehearsal to improve performance in stressful conditions. Joint exercises with allies can themselves serve as a potent diplomatic signal. I believe there is an analogous set of techniques for diplomatic education, and presumably could serve similar purposes. I acknowledge that the Foreign Service Institute has made steady progress towards integrating scenario-based training into its curricula. I suspect they need significantly more resources and leadership imprimatur to expand this approach. As Deputy Secretary of Defense, Bob Work created -- and Congress authorized -- the Warfighting Lab Incentive Fund. Congress should establish a flexible fund to encourage the State Dept to explore this.

As an interim measure, the **State Department could work with DoD to insert more State Department staff to participate in DoD exercises**, which would impose a lesser burden on the State Department and have the added and much needed benefit of exposing both DoD and State personnel to one another in a moment when civil-military relations could benefit from such exposure and familiarization.

Second, the State Department must embrace an entirely new learning paradigm that makes emerging technology a priority not an afterthought in re-imagining training and education for the State Department workforce. Some specific examples of what this could look like would be to start with three pilot projects: first, negotiate a partnership with a learning platform company to make a vast library of online learning available to all State employees; second, work with a virtual reality company to pilot online training for consular affairs and visa processing in a virtual environment; and third, pilot an A-100 class at several American universities as a prototype of a Diplomatic ROTC effort while experimenting with new virtual training approaches.

Moreover, the State Department must contemplate the profound implication of this shift that training does not occur in a set place for a set time, but is possible everywhere and at all times, consistent with the spirit of a Learning Organization. This means that in the near future, the

¹² See U.S. Representative Young Kim's [amendments to H.R. 1157](#).

Foreign Service Institute must exist equally in the physical world as it does in the virtual world. Its course offerings include live only, virtual only, and are fully blended curriculum. Its service population is not restricted to its resident students but open to the entire State workforce -- foreign service officers, civil servants, locally engaged staff, contractors, and interns. The duration of learning is not a week-long class or year-long language study, but the lifespan of employment. I think this view is broadly consistent with the spirit and letter of the amendment to HR-1157 introduced by Rep Young Kim (CA-39).

Conclusion

We need to preserve what the State Department has done right over the last century to train generations of inspirational leaders to represent our values and interests abroad. At the same time, we must boldly experiment with new concepts and practices that will innovate the diplomatic mission. Our diplomacy succeeds when we invest in our workforce, especially in how we train and educate them to succeed in a rapidly evolving and complex world.

The case for change in the workforce looks more urgent when you contemplate the demographic forces at play. According to State Department data: nearly half the Senior Executive Service and almost a quarter of GS-15 employees are currently eligible to retire; within the next decade “nearly all” of the current senior Foreign Service members will be eligible to retire; attrition rates are up.¹³ **Recruitment -- but also training -- will determine the character and capability of the State Department for the next two generations.**

For the last two decades, professional development and training at the State Department has suffered from budgetary constraints, but also, perhaps, from a constraint of imagination driven by a lack of resources and often staffing. **This scarcity mindset chases creativity away.** As Ambassador Nicholas Burns proposed, **I recommend a 15 percent increase in State Department personnel levels to create a training float**, similar to that maintained by the military.¹⁴ Investing in the workforce is also a crucial tool of retention, especially because it attracts and retains the best people.

These workforce concerns necessitate prioritization from State leadership and congressional leadership. I believe that the points that I have highlighted in this testimony are crucial for cultivating a 21st Century diplomatic workforce. I had the great privilege to serve under Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. He famously observed, if budgetary support for the State Department dwindles, then DoD needs to buy more ammunition. Taken in reverse: investing in

¹³<https://federalnewsnetwork.com/workforce/2019/02/nearly-all-state-dept-ses-senior-foreign-service-members-eligible-to-retire-in-next-10-years/>

¹⁴ Ambassadors Nicholas Burns, Marc Grossman, and Marcies Ries offered this recommendation in their 2020 report, *A U.S. Diplomatic Service for the 21st Century*.

the modernization of our diplomatic workforce is an investment in our national security, peace, and prosperity.

Chairman Cardin and Ranking Member Hagerty and members of the subcommittee, thank you for focusing on training and education, as well as giving me the opportunity to provide my perspective today.

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