

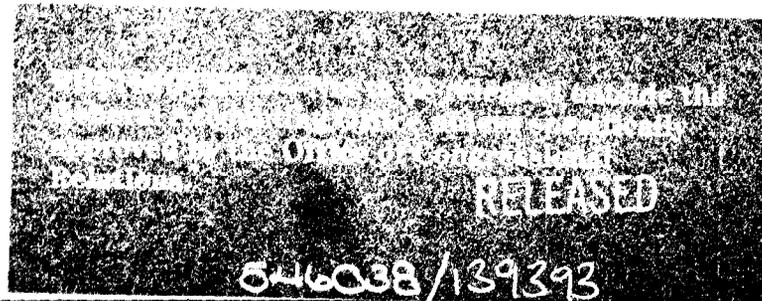
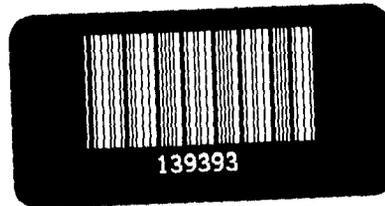
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate

July 1989

STATE DEPARTMENT

Professional Development of Foreign Service Employees



**National Security and
International Affairs Division**

B-235310

July 26, 1989

The Honorable Claiborne Pell
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In response to your September 12, 1988, request, we reviewed the State Department's implementation of section 703 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, which requires the Secretary of State to establish professional development programs for all members of the Foreign Service.

Results in Brief

The Foreign Service Act of 1980 prompted the State Department to revise many of its training programs and to develop new programs. For example, following enactment of the law, State revised junior officer entry-level training to place more emphasis on assignment-related training rather than on orientation and developed a new mid-level training program. The State Department also integrated its area studies program with its language training to ensure closer coordination of these two aspects of preparing its personnel for overseas assignment.

We found that (1) the overall amount of training has declined in recent years, and relatively less time is spent on political training than on training for other Foreign Service assignment areas; (2) due to logistical, fiscal, and other concerns, a single, mandatory mid-level training course developed in response to the act has been replaced by several shorter, optional courses; (3) individuals with the appropriate language skills fill about two-thirds of the language-designated positions (positions requiring a specific language proficiency level); and (4) some Foreign Service employees are reluctant to spend a prolonged period of time in training, away from their duty assignments, and operational pressures often preclude such absences.

Background

The Foreign Service was established in 1924 to help plan and implement U.S. foreign policy and to represent U.S. interests in foreign countries and international organizations. Several federal agencies employ Foreign Service personnel, but the State Department employs the largest number. State has about 5,100 Foreign Service officers, who are traditionally considered to be diplomats, and about 4,200 Foreign Service specialists, such as medical doctors, secretaries, and security personnel.

Foreign Service officers are assigned to four functional work areas—administrative, consular, economic, and political—which the State Department refers to as cones.

Section 703 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 (22 U.S.C. 4023) requires the Secretary of State to establish a professional development program to ensure that members of the Foreign Service obtain the skills and knowledge required at various stages of their careers. For officers, training is designed to broaden their qualifications for more senior levels of responsibility. Training of Foreign Service specialists is designed to enhance their particular skills and expert knowledge, including management skills appropriate to their occupational categories.

The Foreign Service Act of 1946 established the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to provide training to employees of the Department of State and other U.S. government agencies involved in foreign affairs. The 1980 act expanded the training mission of FSI by mandating a structured professional development program for Foreign Service officers with required training at key stages of their careers and increased training for other Department employees.

FSI provides training in specialized and functional fields. In addition to offering courses at its own headquarters in Washington, FSI conducts language training programs at posts abroad and at several field language schools, assists posts in the development of training programs, and provides field posts with training materials. FSI also offers some training to dependents of State Department employees who are likely to enroll in area studies or language courses, or attend sessions at the overseas briefing center. State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security and the Office of Communications also conduct their own training programs. Appendix I provides more background information on State's training programs.

Certain training is mandatory. For example, all personnel, whether officers or specialists, receive entry-level training. All junior officers who are going to their first consular assignment are required to have consular training. Employees who are assigned to a language-designated position and do not have the requisite language skills are required to have language training. Because communications equipment differs at various posts, support communications officers must have the training needed to operate the equipment. The Deputy Chiefs of Mission course is required for officers assigned to that position.

State's fiscal year 1989 budget for professional training and development totals about \$45.8 million.¹ FSI's budget of \$36.9 million includes \$334,000 for external training and an estimated \$6.6 million in reimbursements for training personnel from other agencies. In addition, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security has budgeted an estimated \$7.8 million for security training and development in 1989. State's Office of Communications has its own training facility with a budget of \$1.2 million.

Attendance at Training Courses

Training enrollments have increased since passage of the Foreign Service Act of 1980. According to State records, there were 11,761 State Department enrollments in training courses in 1980. Enrollments increased to 15,664 in fiscal year 1983. Except for an unexplained increase in 1987 post-language enrollments, the number of staff attending training courses has been fairly stable since 1983. However, the amount of time spent in training declined from about 1.5 million hours in 1983 to about 1.2 million hours in 1987, with the post-language program declining by about 200,000 hours. While State officials said it would be difficult to determine the cause of the inconsistency between post-language enrollments and hours, one possible explanation is that more staff and/or dependents attended shorter language courses.

Time spent in professional studies courses—courses directed toward satisfying the additional emphasis on professional development envisioned by the 1980 Foreign Service Act—has declined in recent years. State employees spent about 326,000 hours in professional studies programs in 1987 compared with 346,000 hours in 1983. Appendix II presents more detail on enrollments in FSI training courses, and appendix III shows the number of hours of training.

By far, the largest number of Foreign Service officers are in the political cone. However, within FSI's School of Professional Studies, political training ranks third in terms of enrollments and fourth in hours when compared to the other three cones—less than one day of political training per political officer in fiscal year 1987 (see table 1).

¹This total does not equal the budget items listed here due to rounding.

Table 1: Functional Training of Foreign Service Officers (1987)

Core	Number of officers	Enrollment	Hours
Administrative	902	1,170	55,536
Consular	1,035	720	81,622
Economic	1,194	110	22,248
Political	1,949	151	13,597

In explaining why political training attendance was significantly less than administrative and consular training despite the fact that there were more people in the political area than the others, State officials told us that (1) administrative officers need specific training to be familiar with various fiscal, personnel, and other administrative rules and regulations, and (2) consular officers must be certified (commissioned), and to obtain their commission they require training to be knowledgeable of pertinent immigration laws and regulations. According to an FSI official, many personnel in the political area have a background in political science and believe they can function effectively without extensive training.

State officials also noted that on some occasions bureaus have not approved staff requests to attend political training due to their work load and the time required away from the job. In response, FSI is working with the bureaus to update political courses to better serve their needs, and two political courses have been revised.

Mid-Career Training

The Foreign Service Act of 1980 emphasized the need to provide Foreign Service personnel with the experience and training needed to perform effectively in senior management positions. However, State experienced difficulty with the mid-career training program it had developed.

State initially designed a 20-week mid-level course to satisfy one of the requirements of the 1980 Foreign Service Act. An officer had to attend the course to be eligible for promotion to the class 01 level (GS-15 equivalent). This course included both leadership and functional training. In a 1985 study of its training requirements, the State Department concluded that the course was too long and the management training aspects of the course were provided too early in an officer's career. These factors, along with overly large class sizes, resulted in elimination of the course in 1986 and restructuring of the mid-career training program.

In place of the single mid-level course, FSI developed what it refers to as a "continuum" of shorter, assignment-related functional training courses. In 1988, managerial training aspects of the mid-level course were replaced by the Foreign Affairs Leadership Seminar.

The leadership seminar lasts 2 weeks and is targeted to O1-level officers because, according to an FSI official, this is the level at which an officer assumes management responsibilities. However, political officers, who appear to have the greatest chance of promotion to the Senior Foreign Service based on State's analysis,² accounted for only 6 percent of State's attendance at the first three offerings of this course. By comparison, consular officers accounted for 29 percent of course attendance. Administrative and economic officers each represented about 16 percent of State's attendance, and Foreign Service specialists, State's Civil Service employees, and personnel from other foreign affairs agencies made up the remainder.

In addition to satisfying performance related standards, the Foreign Service Act specifies that members of the Service should satisfactorily complete mid-career training before appointment to the Senior Foreign Service. The mid-level course was initially made mandatory for this reason. However, mid-level courses are no longer mandatory before appointment to the Senior Foreign Service. The guidelines followed by promotion boards in making selections for Senior Foreign Service positions do not contain factors for ensuring the completion of mid-career training.

According to State officials, they do not make training mandatory for several reasons. First, the Department does not have adequate funds to bring large numbers of staff members to Washington specifically for training. Second, since employees are stationed worldwide, there are logistical problems in scheduling training when the employees are reassigned. Third, staff who have not been promoted and have not had the required training may have the basis for a grievance against the Department. These reasons, coupled with State's uncertainty about the appropriate amount of mid-career training and the timing of such training during an individual's career, contribute to State's reluctance to enforce mandatory training.

²A State Department analysis of promotions for 1985 through 1987 shows that more political officers reached the Senior Foreign Service than officers in other cones. During that period, 85 political officers (about 14 percent of eligible political officers) were promoted to the Senior Foreign Service compared with 23 consular officers (12.4 percent), 28 administrative officers (9.6 percent), and 41 economic officers (9.4 percent).

Language Training

FSI's School of Language Studies provides both intensive and part-time training in over 40 languages. To develop the communications skills and cultural awareness needed to live and work effectively abroad, language and area studies are combined in long-term courses ranging in length from 20 to 44 weeks. Up to 2 years of training in the most difficult languages are available; a part of this training is provided at overseas language schools. Familiarization and Short-Term courses of 6 to 10 weeks in length are offered in 18 languages. Part-time language training is conducted in both Washington and at overseas posts.

The Department's language proficiency is measured by the rate at which language-designated positions are filled with personnel who have the required proficiency (referred to as the language compliance rate). Field posts identify language-designated positions, and State's regional bureaus, Bureau of Personnel, and FSI in Washington approve them.

In 1980, we reported that language-qualified staff filled 71 percent of the 1,320 language-designated positions.³ In 1986, language-qualified staff filled 74 percent of the 1,634 language-designated positions; however, our review showed that 67 percent of the 1,784 language-designated positions were filled with language-qualified staff in 1988.

State officials provided various rationales for the decline in the language compliance rate. One State official told us that staff who did not meet the agency's language skill requirements typically would have received language training but had not scored well enough on their competency tests. Another official said that most of the decrease was due to the correction of previous errors in the agency's automated personnel data base. A third official indicated that the decrease since 1980 was due, in part, to an increase in language-designated positions while the size of the work force remained relatively constant.

To determine whether employees who had received long-term language training were making use of their education, we reviewed the current assignments of those employees who had completed long-term language training in 1987. We found that almost all, about 97 percent, of these employees were assigned to positions in which they could make use of their language training.

³More Competence in Foreign Languages Needed by Federal Personnel Working Overseas (ID-80-31, Apr. 15, 1980).

The Assignment Process and Its Impact on Training

Scheduling course attendance is a major factor in providing training to Foreign Service personnel. Each year, about 2,500 Foreign Service personnel are reassigned to positions in the United States and to over 250 embassies, consulates, and missions around the world. According to one State official, two-thirds of these assignments are made during the summer months. Scheduling personnel into training to coincide with reassignments poses a logistical problem for State's assignment staff.

In making job assignments, State uses an open assignment process that takes individual preferences into account but allows State to ultimately determine where the employee is most needed. The assignment process is designed to engage Foreign Service officers and specialists directly in this process by providing open information on all position vacancies and the opportunity to compete openly for positions for which they qualify. Assignment staff within the Bureau of Personnel match qualified employees with available assignments. Factors considered include an employee's bid, personal rank, position rank, language requirements, and needs of the Service. When making reassignments, the assignment staff also review employees' training records to determine what training is needed.

When making assignments, State officials must balance the need to minimize post vacancies, provide needed training, minimize travel costs, provide employees with home leave, allow employees to choose their assignments when possible, and meet State's organizational needs. State officials told us that, given these constraints, they are not always able to provide employees with training they should ideally have.

Staff's Reluctance to Attend Training

Since assignments last 2 to 4 years, Foreign Service officers have a limited amount of time to demonstrate job performance; therefore, according to State officials, they are reluctant to spend extensive amounts of time in training. An FSI official told us that a number of officers are opposed to attending courses over a few weeks long. Another FSI official said that it is difficult to get officers to attend the advanced political course and that at least one course a year is cancelled as a result. An officer who enrolled in a year-long university course noted his reluctance to do so based on "conventional wisdom" within State that this would be a year lost in terms of consideration for promotion.

The Foreign Service personnel system is an up-or-out system, which limits the number of years an employee may spend in any one grade and the number of years an employee may work for the Service before being

promoted to the Senior Foreign Service. State officials told us that this environment had led to employees' fear that being in training makes them less competitive for promotion. To ameliorate this concern, State extends the time limits for promotion to the next higher class level for those employees who enroll in long-term training, such as the more difficult language courses.

Conclusions

The 1980 Foreign Service Act highlighted the need for the training of Foreign Service personnel, and State responded by developing new training courses and updating other courses, prompting an overall increase in training. State's training program has been affected by scheduling, logistical, budgetary, and other considerations.

Our review showed that training attendance has declined somewhat in recent years. Political training courses are less well attended in relative terms than training for other Foreign Service functional areas. We identified several factors that appear to have contributed to the decline in the participation in training courses. These include (1) staff reluctance to attend training; (2) funding and logistical problems, which restrict attendance; and (3) operational pressures, which may prevent staff from leaving their jobs for lengthy training courses. Increased management attention to these factors could result in improved Foreign Service personnel participation in training programs.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to determine what the State Department has done to implement section 703 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

We met with officials of State's FSI, the Bureau of Personnel, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and the Office of Communications. We obtained and reviewed pertinent reports and documents on State's professional development program, policies, and procedures.

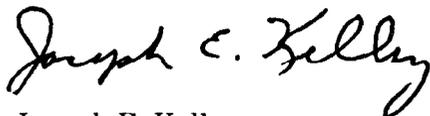
We used State's enrollment data in our analyses. While this data includes the enrollments of employees' dependents, we were told that the dependents are most likely to enroll in the Overseas Briefing Center, Area Studies, and both FSI and post language programs. Dependents would not typically be enrolled in the professional studies courses and long-term language training that are covered in this report. We relied on fiscal year 1983-87 training statistics, which we obtained from State's automated information systems, but we did not verify the accuracy of those systems.

We discussed the results of our work with State Department officials and considered their comments in preparing this report. As you requested, we did not ask the Department of State to provide official comments on a draft of this report. Our work was conducted between September 1988 and March 1989 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of State and other interested parties.

GAO staff members who made major contributions to this report were Joseph F. Murray, Assistant Director; John A. Butcher, Evaluator-in-Charge; and Calvin Chin, Evaluator.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph E. Kelley
Director, Security and
International Relations Issues

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Abbreviations

FSI Foreign Service Institute

State Department Training Programs

Three principal organizations within the State Department provide training to Foreign Service employees—the Foreign Service Institute, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and the Office of Communications. The following is a discussion of some of their programs.

The FSI Training Program

Over the years FSI has established and refined its training program for Foreign Service officers. FSI refers to its training program as a continuum. Early career training is specific and assignment-related. As the officer progresses, training focuses on advanced functional skills. When the officer approaches the senior level, there is an effort to integrate, broaden, and deepen the officer's professional and executive abilities.

Entry-level Foreign Service officers are assigned to an 8-week training program. Also, early in their careers officers receive assignment-specific training in what are referred to as trade craft courses to prepare them for political or economic assignments, as well as their first assignment in Washington. At the mid-level, officers may receive additional assignment-specific training referred to as functional intensive training. Other assignment-specific courses, such as Washington trade craft or Deputy Chiefs of Mission training, are also available.

At the 01 level, officers receive management training in the form of the 2-week Foreign Affairs Leadership Seminar. FSI's Senior Seminar is the most prestigious of its training programs and is offered to a limited number of staff at or above the 01 level. The 9-month program has been conducted annually since 1958. The seminar is presented to 25 to 30 senior officials (GS-15 and above and their Foreign Service and military equivalents) from State, other federal agencies, and the armed services. The purpose of the seminar is to ensure that these officials better understand (1) the influences on our foreign relations and (2) the major international and national security issues of current concern. The seminar is also aimed at enhancing executive skills such as negotiations and public speaking.

The Department offers long-term external training to mid- and senior-level officers. Officers apply for this training and selection boards decide who will attend. Programs in this category include year-long university economics training programs and other college training. In addition, training positions are available to State employees at Department of Defense schools such as the National Defense University.

Diplomatic Security Training

From entry into the Foreign Service until assignment overseas (normally in the fifth year), a Bureau of Diplomatic Security special agent spends 39 weeks in training. A key part of this training includes 8 weeks of criminal investigator training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia. Previously, in-service training focused primarily on firearms and counter-surveillance. The Bureau is instituting a new in-service refresher course this year, which will include topics such as interrogation, arrest and search warrants, and undercover operations.

Diplomatic Security also employs engineering security officers, who undergo 23 weeks of training before an overseas assignment. The focus of their training is on electronics security.

Communications Training

The Office of Communications operates its own training center in Warrenton, Virginia. The Center primarily provides training to support communications officers who are responsible for operating State's telecommunications and cryptographic equipment. The Center provides a 12-week entry-level course before officers are assigned overseas. In addition, officers must receive training on any post-specific equipment before their initial or any subsequent assignments. The Center also offers a 5-day management skills course and refresher training (on an as-needed basis).

Number of State Department Staff Enrolled in FSI Training

Course	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Senior Seminar	10	12	14	14	12
Extension (external) training	2,201	2,609	2,169	2,257	1,630
Academic Affairs	69	68	73	84	73
School of Area Studies	1,852	1,716	1,512	1,493	1,319
Overseas Briefing Center	0	0	486	599	281
School of Professional Studies					
Administrative training	2,037	1,461	1,673	1,744	1,170
Consular training	556	539	704	827	720
Economic training	147	129	134	153	110
Political training	209	144	115	106	151
Junior officer	194	230	341	287	262
Mid-level	175	706	497	44	13
Executive development	354	398	262	342	459
Communications and clerical skills	545	664	745	751	499
Orientation	641	401	641	668	508
Information management	0	0	0	0	48
Total	4,858	4,672	5,112	4,922	3,940
School of Language Studies					
FSI Washington	1,219	1,125	1,226	1,333	1,181
Post-language program ^a	5,409	5,522	5,774	4,369	7,216
Field Schools	46	40	46	62	60
Total	6,674	6,687	7,046	5,764	8,457
Total enrollment	15,664	15,764	16,412	15,133	15,712

Note: Some of these enrollments include dependents of State Department employees.

^aState officials were unable to explain the substantial increase in 1987 post-language enrollments.

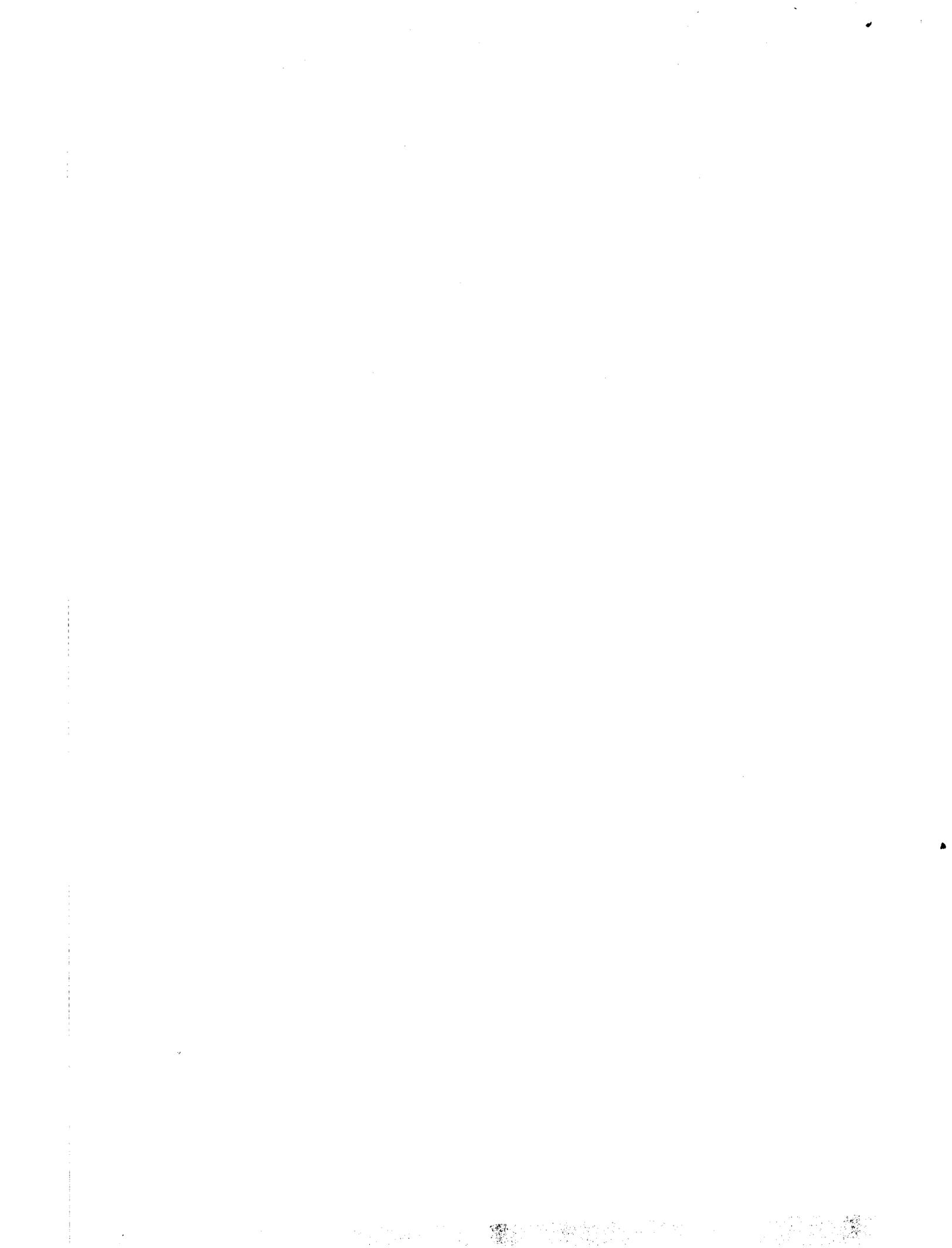
Source: Department of State

Hours of FSI Training for State Department Staff

Course	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
Senior Seminar	14,720	18,240	19,688	20,552	17,520
Extension (external) training	64,955	92,295	66,498	70,130	52,690
Academic Affairs	92,216	97,740	88,608	81,904	86,816
School of Area Studies	116,128	110,329	106,520	114,392	96,301
Overseas Briefing Center	0	0	5,943	9,634	4,701
School of Professional Studies					
Administrative training	58,184	55,832	53,802	54,445	55,536
Consular training	58,244	63,936	75,449	90,412	81,622
Economic training	31,616	47,232	45,728	47,316	22,248
Political training	8,808	8,560	6,824	9,252	13,597
Junior officer	50,984	58,712	80,492	59,732	75,752
Mid-level	88,632	192,708	68,324	19,048	1,040
Executive development	12,444	11,136	8,268	15,907	32,148
Communications and clerical skills	16,475	21,133	30,584	28,899	18,486
Orientation	20,452	13,996	17,321	19,967	15,106
Information management	0	0	0	0	10,692
Total	345,839	473,245	386,792	344,978	326,227
School of Language Studies					
FSI Washington	477,964	445,858	433,993	520,349	474,951
Post-language program	321,897	286,174	267,051	196,043	114,826
Field Schools	50,472	37,384	37,440	57,272	52,449
Total	850,333	769,416	738,484	773,664	642,226
Total hours of training	1,484,191	1,561,265	1,412,533	1,415,254	1,226,481

Note: Some of these hours were earned by dependents of State Department employees.

Source: Department of State



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