

Why GAO Did This Study

Because the U.S. Department of State (State) is the lead U.S. foreign affairs agency, its personnel require certain knowledge, skills, and abilities to address the global challenges and security threats facing the United States. State devoted about \$255 million to personnel training in fiscal year 2010; the department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) is the primary training provider for State's more than 66,000 Foreign Service, civil service, and locally employed staff (LE staff) worldwide. GAO was asked to examine (1) State's purpose and structure for training personnel and (2) the extent to which State's training incorporates elements for effective training programs. GAO reviewed and analyzed data and documentation related to the agency's training efforts; completed a training assessment using a tool developed based on prior GAO guidance; and interviewed officials in Washington, D.C., and at 12 overseas posts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making several recommendations for State to improve strategic planning and evaluation of the department's efforts to train personnel, including for improvements to State's efforts to assess training needs and efforts to ensure training achieves desired results. State reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with our recommendations.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Additional Steps Are Needed to Improve Strategic Planning and Evaluation of Training for State Personnel

What GAO Found

State's purpose for training personnel is to develop the men and women the United States requires to fulfill its leadership role in world affairs and to advance and defend U.S. interests. State guidance outlines key training roles, including FSI's primary role in developing training policies and facilitating necessary training, and the Bureau of Human Resources' role in assigning employees to training and working with FSI to help ensure it meets their needs. Other bureaus, offices, and posts also share responsibilities for training. FSI currently offers more than 700 classroom courses, and has recently increased its focus on distance learning. Overall, about 40 percent of personnel training over the last 5 fiscal years, on average, was in foreign language skills. Other training for personnel generally focused on developing leadership, management, and other professional and technical skills and knowledge.

State has taken many steps to incorporate the interrelated elements of an effective training program—planning, design, implementation, and evaluation—into its extensive training for personnel; however, the department's strategic approach to workforce training has several key weaknesses. The department demonstrated a variety of ways in which it has endeavored to develop an effective training program, such as by compiling an annual training plan, and implementing a range of training evaluation mechanisms and a learning management system that can be used to track training delivery. However, GAO's analysis found several gaps in the department's efforts to strategically plan and prioritize training, ensure efficient and effective training design and delivery, and determine whether or how training and development efforts contribute to improved performance and desired results. For example:

- State lacks a systematic, comprehensive training needs assessment process incorporating all bureaus and overseas posts.
- State developed training continuums to provide information for employees about training opportunities, career paths, and how training can help employees attain career goals, but the continuums do not provide complete and accurate information, and other guidance does not cover all personnel.
- State lacks formal guidance for curriculum design and for data collection and analysis, and thus cannot be assured that proper practices and procedures are systematically and comprehensively applied.
- State could not sufficiently demonstrate consistent and appropriate support for training, because the department does not track detailed information on training cost and delivery that would allow for an analysis and comparison of employees in different groups, bureaus, regions, or posts.
- State's performance measures for training generally do not fully address training goals, and are generally output- rather than outcome-oriented.