



Career Opportunities Video Series: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers
Sofia, Department of State Foreign Service Institute

I chose to work for the Federal Government

because once I have lived for a couple of years in DC area,

I realized that majority of jobs here is related to federal government
or is actually with the federal government.

I understood that this is where all the—mainly the opportunities are.

And that's how I started looking for a job in the federal government.

I work at the Department of State and specifically in its own training center,
which is called Foreign Service Institute (FSI).

I found my position because a colleague of mine told me about a language school
that was contracted with the State Department
and they were looking for language instructors,
and this is how I applied for this job.

I have a Bachelor's degree in English from my home country, from Estonia.

And also, I got my Master's degree here at George Mason University and the degree is in
Linguistics.

Both of my degrees focused on second language acquisition.

And I also have taught language before I came to work for the Department of State.

So that's really like my lifelong path.

And it was only natural that I would apply to one of these jobs.

I use my language skills by teaching Russian to the diplomats
who are assigned to work at the embassies and consulates in the countries where Russian is
spoken.

Our program is very intensive and we teach 5 hours every day, 5 days a week.

It is 3 hours of speaking and 2 hours of reading.

And for the rest of the day, we prepare for the class next day.

I have about 20, if not more, colleagues who are all native speakers of Russian.

And we do interact, of course, in terms of discussing our curriculum and sometimes teaching methods.

We also organize cultural events for our students,

let's say, the celebration of most prominent holidays in Russian culture.

We have heritage speakers in our workplace

and I do think they bring a lot of value

because heritage speakers are these unique individuals

who are intimately familiar with both cultures, American and Russian.

And that helps really very much in explaining cultural differences.

In terms of professional development, FSI offers really great training.

And let's say, for language instructors,

there is an array of courses in teaching methodology,

in class management, in, let's say, teaching specifically diplomats for their job.

Also talking about interpersonal relationships,

working with, let's say, counterparts who don't necessarily see eye-to-eye with you or don't agree with you.

So there is a lot of focus on communications.

Through this job, first of all,

I have learned the mission and the importance of the Department of State,

not only as an American agency,

but also as a foreign affairs agency would work in any country
and I can see how it facilitates international dialogue.

I'm also very happy that my work contributes to this international dialogue
and to the mission of the Department of State because we train diplomats on all levels.

Our students are ambassadors and consul generals
and people who work for consular sections and issue visas
and all of this really makes me a part of a bigger mission.

I think I have started being much more attentive to kids who are learning Russian here in
America.

I have become very interested in the schools who offer language classes
to the kids whose parents, let's say, are both Russian
or if one parent is Russian because now, I can see how they can benefit from learning a
language.

And there actually are several exciting careers they can choose
and it's very interesting and important.

My advice to the heritage speakers who are pursuing a job in the federal government
would be to really stay committed to language early on
because to know a language well, you know, it's a long-term project, I would say.

And what would help you very much is to get
yet maybe some other skill and another profession on top of that.