

Careers in Intelligence Panel

September 18, 2009

Panelist Introductions

Michael Richter ('03 BA) - Pentagon, Senior Intelligence Analyst. He was a 2003 grad in Political Science, concentrating on Russian and European society. The focus of his job is on Russian Foreign Policy in the Division of Defense and on Middle East Policy. He took a Penn-in-Washington Semester when he was a student. He spent a summer in St. Petersburg, Russia learning the language. Analysts need good analytical, mathematical, reading, writing, and foreign language skills.

Thomas Nestel, ('06 MS, AM, working on PhD) – Chief of Police in Upper Moreland, previously Philadelphia Police Department, Criminal Intelligence Unit. He started his career in the Philadelphia Police Department, and began the Criminal Intelligence Unit in Philadelphia when he was there. This resulted from a paper he had written in college which his professor sent to the Police Commissioner; after he was on the force, he was called into the Commissioner's office to discuss his ideas posed in the paper that Intelligence is collected at the street level in the police department, but never combined with other intelligence, analyzed and returned to the street level officers, where it would be most effective. This led to being asked to set up and manage this unit. Here's a prime example of "it's a small world" and networking --- he didn't know his professor knew the Police Commissioner well enough to send him Tom's paper, or that it would be read by the Commissioner and make such an impact.

Jill Christensen, Deputy Chief for Outreach, Defense Intelligence Agency. She's been with DIA for 20 years. She started as a Russian Analyst, having studied Russian and Political Science. Her daily work involves training US ambassadors and other VIP's in military capability and arms control, as well as training military units before they are deployed. She's worked closely with Congressional Affairs and the Intelligence Oversight Committees. All these groups need to know the same information, so it's great that they are getting the same training. This unit is the primary source of military intelligence, basically the CIA for Defense. A technical collector is another position in her organization; they see what technology is available and being used in other parts of the world, reports back to the Agency, giving them the chance to build and use the same or better equipment.

Olivia Troye ('99 BA), National Counter Terrorism Center, was unable to attend at the last minute.

Advice and Questions

Advice from the Federal employees is to apply well in advance of the time when you are available to start working. Some searches take a year to conduct for full time positions, 3-5 months for summer positions. They even suggest you take another job for a year till you hear you're approved and are given a start date. DIA is hiring now; they are especially interested in candidates who like to travel, can show they have travelled extensively, have knowledge of other cultures, including having relatives who live overseas, language skills including reading, writing, presentation and briefing skills. Toastmaster Clubs give great experience for this.

Tom stated at this point that he'd be happy to have any and all of you apply to his organization. He stated and the other two agreed that on-the-street police experience is a great start for moving up in the intelligence industry.

Basically, they all agreed that you need strong skills, with a passion or expertise that you're developing.

Mike was asked about good professors at Penn to work with.

- He said look at the classes professors teach. Political science, languages, international relations, criminology, etc. Take classes with them. Get to know them. Let them know your interest and passion in working in these fields, and get their assistance. They probably have good contacts in the field.

Mike was also asked why he chose the Defense Department rather than the CIA.

- He responded that 80 percent of governmental intelligence collection resides in the Department of Defense, rather than in the CIA. It's a very powerful community in the federal bureaucracy, and he likes that.

A sophomore IR student who is also strong in Math asked what opportunities might especially value his background.

- Math will be very helpful in analyst positions. It shows strong thinking skills. He said that whatever skills you might have would be helpful and there will be a way to use them in Intelligence. It's a matter of developing experience and a passion and being able to support them.

A Masters in Criminology student asked when he should start applying for positions if he's graduating in May.

- Start now. Maybe even take an internship or another job while you're waiting for your application to be processed.

Why aren't there more minorities in the local forces? How can this be fixed?

- Tom said APPLY! Take the test and join the department. He actively recruits minorities, but can't always get them. Obviously to be effective intelligence officer on the streets, you need diversity – you need someone who looks like the gangs/communities you're trying to infiltrate. Yes, it's a hard area to break into, but worth the effort. He said the police departments desperately need good smart candidates.

Defense also needs and wants minorities and diverse candidates. They need people with expertise in other cultures to help improve the intelligence information they are able to gather. Mike said yes, there are positions where you do the "no kidding" spy stuff you see on TV, if you like danger and a challenge, but also can endure long boring stakeouts.

Does a position with the Peace Corp help you get into the intelligence field more easily?

- Actually, you should check before you go that route. There is a time period between when you finish with the Peace Corps before you can join the intelligence community – the Peace Corps wants to be very sure the cultures where their people are placed don't think they are there as undercover intelligence agents.

Do you teach languages that will be needed or do you need to know them before you apply?

- Most of these positions have language needs. It's good to have as much knowledge as you can. The thing is that you will come out of college with language skills that allow you to read "literature". You will then be trained by these organizations on the colloquialisms and everyday language needed to perform these duties. Some people actually are sent for full time language classes, tutoring, etc. Certain languages are especially needed right now: Russian, Turkish, Farsi, Afghan, etc. Brown bag lunches are a great way to get together with others to keep up your language skills. It's a good thing to focus on early in your schooling – what languages do you know and do you still have time to learn.

What piece of advice would each of you give our students?

- Jill: In the federal intelligence agencies, it's still very much the "old boy network". She recommends you look for people you might know, network with them and through them. It's great to know people. Also, keep bugging HR departments who are holding your applications. Make sure they know how interested you are and by contacting them regularly (within reason, of course) to see the status of your application will help it not drop to the bottom of the pile. Take advantage of the Penn community for networking opportunities.
- Tom: In your interviews, be sure to tell the truth. Be accurate and complete in your answers. If you have an arrest or have done drugs, talk about it. Better to say you had done them when you were younger (and of course are no longer doing them) than for them to find out that you had done them. Remember their background checks are very thorough. Keep a copy of all of your applications, so you can refer back to them and see how you answered questions. Agencies do share information with each other, so be straight and truthful.
- Mike: We're looking for integrity. If you're using drugs, stop now. Be clear and accurate in your answers, and just answer the question asked.

What mistakes have you seen people make in their applications and interviews?

- To be successful, you need high GPA's; passion and expertise. Plan ahead so you can have relevant course work, internships or travel experiences on your resume.
- Don't have too cavalier an attitude especially in the military. It's a very deferential community. Be respectful and formal in all your communications. Even if you're communicating by email, treat it like a formal letter. Call your contacts by their titles, not their first name (i.e. Dear General Smith, not Dear Joe), no matter how many interviews you've had or letters you've received.