

JUNE 1964

CRITERIA FOR SCREENING APPLICANTS  
FOR WORK WITH COFO IN MISSISSIPPI

The question of screening applicants is a difficult one, for the whole idea of "judging" is somewhat abhorrent to me. However, I know Mississippi and I know how projects work and I have to consider those projects. I've seen whole projects fall apart because of one incompetent person.

The question of criteria is still difficult, though, because the kind of "incompetance" that is dangerous in civil rights work in Mississippi has nothing to do with technical skills, education, experience--it has to do with abstracts, like ability to live with people and accept them for what they are.

The person who is dangerous to the movement is the person who is totally involved with self, for instance. We are too dependant upon each other and must use teamwork too often to be able to concern ourselves with ourselves. We have to be conscious every minute of the other person's needs, moods, capabilities. Not only is this true of those we work with, but of the people in the community we are trying to organize. The person who is wrapped up in himself can never hope to reach out and help those we are dealing with.

Obviously, the sadistic or violent person is not needed. Nor are those who are limited in their perspectives, such as the person who will only teach in a freedom school. There is no place for the well-meaning idealist who wants to secure equality and brotherly love for all, and is solidly anti-politics--the movement, and COFO specifically, is totally involved in politics, let's face it.

We are also in no need of the bright college student who "has all the answers"--who has studied the situation carefully from every angle and can see what's being done wrong and knows how to do it right. This may be true (it usually isn't), but he's never going to be able to get near enough to a staff person to convince him.

In order to survive in Mississippi and be valuable in the movement here, a person has to be realistic and responsible (LIVES ARE AT STAKE!!!). He has to be flexible and have an understanding of people. He should be willing (and able) to listen. He must be willing to tackle all kinds of jobs, even if "inexperienced" or "unskilled" in those areas. He must be able to work and live with people, accept them for what they are and not try to change them (we are not trying to make the Mississippi farmer just like us...).

He must be able to work under intense strain, to cope with emergency or merely emotional situations. He must be able to accept inconvenience or discomfort (lack of privacy, no hot water). He must be reasonably independent, although he is working as a member of a team.

That's a big order, I know--but it's not, in a way. All of this means that a person should have some common sense and a feeling for people. Simple as that.