

14 April 1964

TO: Mississippi Summer Project Interviewers
FROM: Mississippi Summer Project Committee
RE: Guidelines for interviewing

During the Freedom Vote for Governor campaign in the fall of 1963 over seventy Yale and Stanford students came to Mississippi. Since these volunteers were in the state for no more than a week, there was no opportunity to make extensive evaluation of their ability to adjust to movement conditions in Mississippi. But one strong observation can be drawn from their participation. The great majority of students came down with the attitude --- "I know I am only going to be here for a very short period of time, but I am willing to help in whatever way you think I can." There were some students, however, who came to Mississippi with fixed ideas about what they wanted to do and what they hoped to achieve. A case study might best illustrate this attitude.

One student arriving in Jackson received initial authorization to go to Yazoo City, a hard-core town, where in the past civil rights workers had been driven out. He was sent to Canton to discuss plans for this move with the project director there. The project director, however, viewing his entire area and its work needs, felt that a move into Yazoo City at the time would be ill-advised. The student became extremely argumentative and repeatedly insisted on being taken to Yazoo City. The project director became so harrassed he called Jackson for assistance and was advised to bring the student back to Jackson. In Jackson, several of the members of the staff leadership tried to explain the importance of abiding by decisions of the local staff head; the student, however, continued to argue and insist that he be permitted to go to Yazoo City. Since no one could reason with him, it was decided that he should remain in Jackson until it was time for him to leave the state.

This case study should give the interviewer a general idea of one criterion, and perhaps the most important one, for evaluating applicants. If the problem presented by the above student were multiplied enough times (there will be almost a thousand volunteers in Mississippi this summer) the whole program could be jeopardized and lives could even be lost.

A few more general observations can be made:

The lack of experience in civil rights activity or in the South need not (and should not) be considered grounds

for disqualifying an applicant. (This should be clear from the size of the project being undertaken in Mississippi this summer.) But it is essential that an applicant possess a learning attitude toward work in Mississippi. This is not to discourage ingenuity or creativity; it means that an applicant must have some understanding that his role will only be a stopgap one: that the movement will have to continue after he leaves and that his role will be to work with local leadership, not to overwhelm it. He can only do this if he shows some respect for what has gone before him and an understanding of what must continue after he leaves. He must be capable of understanding that the success of the Mississippi movement depends on the development of those who live and will remain in the state. A student who seems determined to carve his own niche, win publicity and glory when he returns home can only have harmful effects on the Mississippi program.

There are other criteria which should guide the Mississippi Summer Project interviewers. Perhaps it would be sufficient to list these and allow the individual interviewer as much leeway as possible in making a balanced evaluation of an applicant.

1. Experience and training in teaching or community work will be of great value to the project.
2. Special skills (e.g. in the arts, in health care, in communication) would be similarly valuable.
3. A basic sense that the civil rights movement (not just abstract justice) is a good thing.
4. A willingness to admit doubts and fears about going to Mississippi.
5. An understanding of the risks involved in working in Mississippi -- jail, possible beatings, etc. (Under Mississippi political conditions it would be impossible to insure an individual working even in a "safe situation" that he will not be arrested.)
6. Some understanding of the living conditions they will have to work under in Mississippi, i.e. the fact that they will be living in homes and sharing food with people who are extremely poor.
7. Excessive nervousness (if such can be detected in an interview) would be a hazard to the applicant as well as to others under Mississippi conditions.
8. Extremely dogmatic and ideological views would probably be a detriment to the project. Mississippi has real problems which must be approached and understood empirically.

Further, interviewers should be on guard for those who take an apocalyptic view toward the Mississippi summer program -- the struggle for political and social justice in Mississippi will not reach a conclusion as a result of this summer.

Final note: The above criteria are those which we thought would be meaningful in interviewing people for civil rights work in Mississippi. We did not believe it would be useful to list criteria which most interviewers would apply anyway (e.g. emotional maturity, responsibility). Finally, interviewers have been left to formulate their own questions for the purpose of eliciting pertinent responses from applicants.