

LaFollette School of Public Affairs

Assessment Update 2009

The La Follette School believes that the actual practice of public affairs tools in and outside of class is a way to assess the knowledge conveyed to its graduate students. As advisors and teachers, faculty members assess their students' understanding of class concepts in traditional ways but also by offering culminating experiences to ensure students truly learn how to apply the tools of the public affairs profession.

Many La Follette faculty members use integrated projects within the curriculum in which a student can use newly acquired skills. In Public Affairs 819 students use publicly available data in a course-long research project that requires them to identify an important policy question, set up and conduct an empirical analysis to address the question, and interpret the results and describe them to their peers in a professional presentation. Professor Dave Weimer matches students with actual clients in his Cost-Benefit Analysis course in which students have to use their CBA analysis tools for real policy issues. There are several examples like these in management courses and other analysis courses as well.

All La Follette students are required to take a final semester course, Workshop for Public Affairs, in which students are expected to draw upon all of their management and analytical tools learned over the two years of coursework. The following description is from Professor Holden's Workshop syllabus:

"PA 869 is the capstone course for La Follette students in the MPA program. It is designed to provide the practical applications of skills acquired during the previous three semesters of course work. While many La Follette courses have students working on real world problems, often for actual clients, this course is designed specifically to have students work as a team on a policy issue proposed by an actual client before whom you will present your report. As in the public policy world, you will work in a team with individuals selected based on relevant skills and knowledge to produce a report that is well documented, well written and edited, and extremely professional in content and appearance. The report is being written for the client and thus will require students working with the clients to discover the best way to approach the issue and explore it in a way most useful for the client's purposes."

The La Follette School also annually reviews student learning by looking at input from first-year and second-year surveys and course evaluations. One of the topics covered in the student surveys is how they perceive their success in acquiring tools. Over the time that surveys have been conducted, many curriculum changes have been implemented in response to students wanting more professional training. One that stands out was the merging of two separate tracks of public management and policy analysis into one. La Follette also developed the Career Development Seminar, a one credit seminar in which students begin to explore what tools are necessary for specific careers and the opportunity to practice writing memos and making presentations. Stronger emphasis has also been placed on internship experiences. La Follette students are strongly encouraged to engage in experiences in which they utilize their skills. The Associate Director oversees their work and ensures the experience is a successful learning experience by approving only relevant internships and requiring a written report on the internship.