

**College of Letters and Sciences
Assessment Report
1997-1998 Academic Year**

Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs

Abstract

During the 1997-98 academic year, the La Follette Institute of Public Affairs continued to refine a series of performance indicators that have been in use for several years. The assessment activities focus on the Institute's graduate program in public affairs; the Institute has no undergraduate program.

The Institute has developed indicators to measure its success in preparing students for careers in public affairs. These objectives are:

- Establish and maintain one of the nation's premier programs in policy analysis and public management
- Provide students with a high-quality education in policy analysis and public management that will prepare them for careers in the public service and elsewhere.
- Provide students with education of long-term value.
- Provide a program that allows students to complete their training in a reasonable time.

The La Follette Institute has been measuring its performance against these goals for years. Over the last year, we have been working to refine our indicators, to improve measures for existing indicators, and to develop new indicators to gauge better our performance.

We have used the information collected through the assessment process to modify our program as follows:

- *Curriculum.* We have revised the basic curriculum. In response to discussions with students and surveys of alumni and employers, a proposal is now pending in the Graduate School to merge the separate degree tracks in policy analysis and public management into a single degree track.
- *Job skills.* Our surveys with both employers and students have demonstrated the need for greater skills in communication, presentation, and statistical skills. We have developed a new course, to be offered for the first time in the fall term of 1998, which will train students in effective job skills.
- *Teaching techniques.* Our assessment tools have revealed that both students and potential employers value skills and knowledge developed in instructor-supervised student group projects on current public affairs problems. Such projects have been developed in two courses: PA878, Introduction to Public Management; and PA869, Policy Analysis.
- *Student support.* In response to student concerns about gaining employable skills and increasing financial aid, we have developed an aggressive program of finding state-sponsored policy research projects in which students can be employed.

We conclude that this assessment report demonstrates a graduate program of very high quality but one struggling with fundamental resource problems.

Assessment Tools Used

The nature of our graduate program makes director indicators, such as national and local exams, unworkable. We have focused instead on indirect indicators and have developed multiple indicators for our multiple objectives.

Goal: Prepare students for careers in public service: policy analysis and public management

Objective 1: Establish and maintain one of the nation's premier programs in policy analysis and public management

Indicator	Measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation of the quality of the graduate program by the faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The faculty have discussed the program's quality in comparison with their knowledge of other nationally ranked programs. Program changes are the result of these discussions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ranking in national survey of graduate programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program ranked #11 overall nationally (tied with Duke and SUNY-Albany) in spring 1998 U.S. News and World Report survey Program ranked #2 in nation in social policy in U.S. News and World Report survey
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proportion of University Fellowship and La Follette Institute fellowship offers accepted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University fellowship offers made and accepted <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: 1 made, 1 accepted 1999-97: 4 made, 0 accepted 1997-98: 7 made, 4 accepted Advanced Opportunity Fellowship offers made and accepted <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: 1 made, 1 accepted 1996-97: 2 made, 2 accepted 1997-98: 0 made, 0 accepted La Follette fellowship offers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: 14 made, 6 accepted 1996-97: 12 made, 5 accepted 1997-98: 15 made, 5 accepted Students holding fellowships funded from outside sources who attend La Follette <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1995-96: 3 1996-97: 1 1997-98: 1 Assessment: indicators show that La Follette competes effectively for the best public policy students in the nation,

	although continued progress can be made
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Success in attracting highly qualified minority students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students of color in first-year class <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1994-95: 1 of 28 • 1995-96: 3 of 27 • 1996-97: 5 of 31 • 1997-98: 3 of 30 • Assessment: substantial improvement, but continued effort required

Objective 2: Provide students with a high-quality education in policy analysis and public management that will prepare them for careers in the public service and elsewhere.

Indicator	Measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral exit interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In May 1997, the Outreach Director completed 15-60 minute oral interviews with a randomized 30% sample of the graduating class. Another oral survey will be conducted of May 1998 graduates.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written exit interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In May 1997, the Outreach Director distributed a survey to all graduating students. Response rate: 60 percent. Another written survey will be distributed to May 1998 graduates. • Summary and analysis of oral and written exit surveys: • Students unanimously would attend La Follette again. Principal reasons: high quality of university; proximity to state government; flexibility offered by hybrid faculty and small student body. • Students surprised by the connections faculty have. • Suggestions for improving curriculum: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More emphasis on leadership (more material has been incorporated into core courses) • More visiting faculty (more visiting faculty have been hired as budget has permitted) • Rethink core courses (part of curriculum reform) • Require a full year of statistics (more methods introduced in new skills course) • Require real-life experiences in PA878 (done) • Encourage more writing (done in PA878, PA869) • Offer presentation skills (incorporated in PA878 and new skills course) • Rethink sequence of courses (part of curriculum reform)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More courses on public accounting and budgeting (done with an adjunct visiting professor) • Other observations included improving faculty-student relations; balance Washington-state-local interests; balance policy analysis-public management (suggestions for reform implemented; others being considered by faculty)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written survey following graduation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (under development)

Objective 3: Provide students with education of long-term value.

Indicator	Measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track alumni careers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailing conducted of graduates after first year to determine job status.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with a sample of alumni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information collected from panels of graduates who speak at orientation and La Follette Brown Bag programs. • Graduates interviewed on return to La Follette to interview graduates for prospective employment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with sample of employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placement Director maintains regular contact with employers in placing graduates in jobs and internships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of feedback provided by alumni and employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback: Many La Follette graduate move into private sector. (Information being used to refine curriculum.) • Feedback: Graduates seeking employment on broader geographical base. (Information being used to broader placement activities.) • Feedback: importance of writing skills. (Information used to revise curriculum.)

Objective 4: Provide a program that allows students to complete their training in a reasonable time. (Note: the measures below will be benchmarked for future comparisons. We are very satisfied with all of the measures but seek to increase the financial support provided students.)

Indicator	Measure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time to degree 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 semesters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of students who graduate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 95%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of students provided financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% on fellowship or project assistantship

Narrative

La Follette's assessment effort leads to the following conclusions:

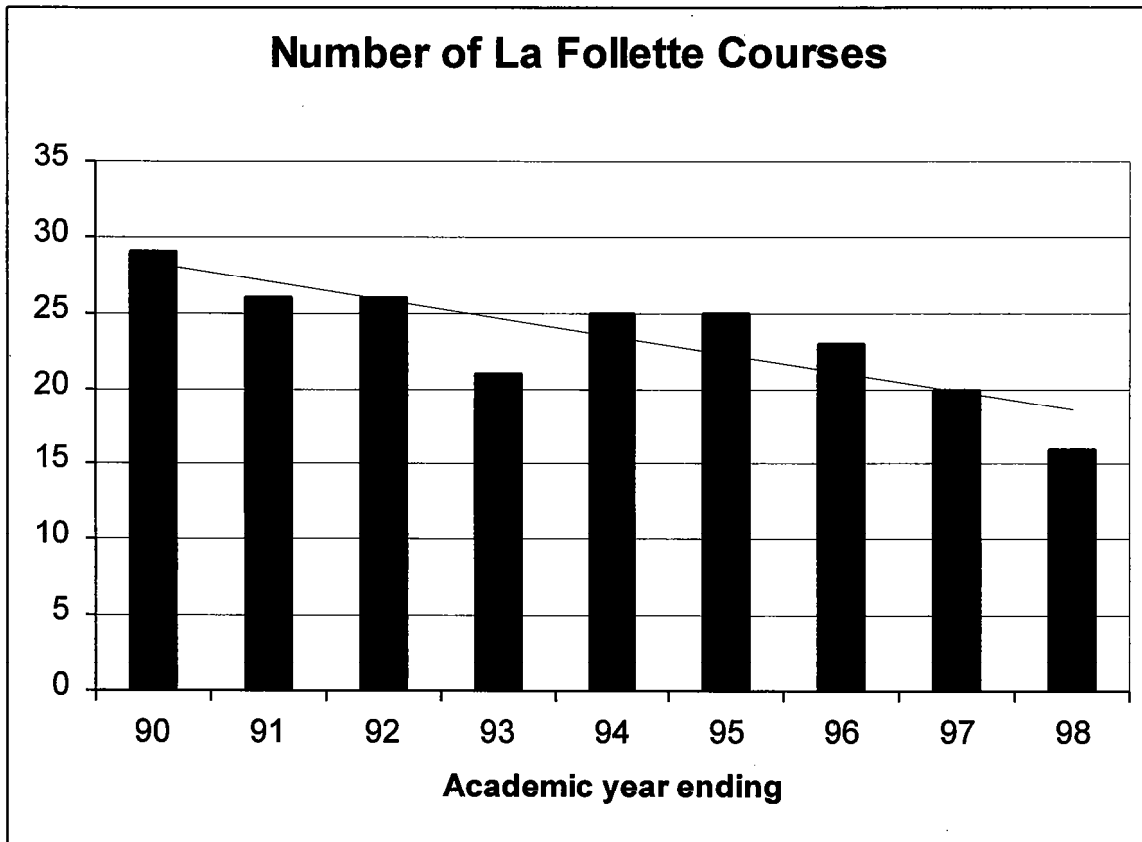
1. La Follette has indeed established and maintained one of the nation's premier programs in policy analysis and public management. It has successfully competed for many of the nation's best graduate students. Its quality has been recognized in the *U.S. News and World Report* survey. While the methodology of the survey is flawed, it is the only national survey in the field. (The National Research Council does not survey public affairs programs.) The schools ranked ahead of La Follette in this survey are all much larger and older. Thus, La Follette's high ranking—tied with Duke and SUNY Albany—is a sign of a program with a strong national reputation.
2. La Follette provides students with a high-quality education. The exit interviews suggest several important areas for curriculum reform; these reforms are now under faculty review and discussion and will be debated at the annual summer faculty retreat with a new curriculum to be defined in the fall of 1998. Students are eager for practical applications of their course-based learning. An expansion of internships and group projects is now providing more of these opportunities.
3. La Follette provides students with an education of long-term value. Surveys of alumni and employers show that La Follette graduates are highly valued by employers and that graduates believe that their education provides useful long-term training. It is clear that the career paths of graduates often takes unpredictable turns. That poses future challenges to La Follette: providing training to help students gain valuable first-time jobs while at the same time giving them the broad perspective required for a rapidly changing world.
4. La Follette students complete their training on time. Almost all students graduate, and full-time students graduate in the standard two-year cycle. A significant number of students receives financial aid; continued efforts to increase the amount of financial aid could provide La Follette with the ability to attract more top-tier students and to allow them to complete their education in a timely way.

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- *Student support.* In response to student concerns about gaining employable skills and increasing financial aid, we have developed an aggressive program of finding state-sponsored policy research projects in which students can be employed.

We conclude that the graduate program in public affairs is a very strong one with nationally recognized excellence. However, as the figure below makes clear, the program suffers for a serious resource problem. The number of courses offered in the program has steadily been dropping. It will be difficult for the program to retain its national ranking if this trend continues.



During the 1998-99 academic year, La Follette will develop a measurement instrument for the indicator still under development.