La Follette

Assessment of the Graduate Degrees
May 2006

Overview of the program

The Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs offers two master's degrees-- a Masters in Public Affairs (MPA) and a Master in International Public Affairs (MIPA). It does not offer an undergraduate major although an Accelerated Degree program allows students in their last undergraduate students to begin graduate work, requiring only one additional year to attain the MPA or MIPA degree. There is no formal PhD Public Affairs degree. One student is working on a PhD Committee Degree in Public Affairs and the Executive Committee has agreed to offer this option to others. Each year about 50-60 students newly enroll each fall for the two-year degree program (Figure 1).   Fall 2006 may be a larger class, due to an apparent higher rate of acceptance of offers of admission.   The Public Affairs degree is normally completed in two years.

To assure that the curriculum continues to prepare students for the range of management and analysis positions currently demanded in the wider profession and that will be demanded as policies, issues, and institutions change over time the program is formally assessed by a Curriculum Committee that regularly reviews programmatic issues and a full faculty curriculum review at the annual Faculty Retreat. Reviews over the past five years have led to major changes in the program including the authorization of the MIPA degree in 1999 with the first students being admitted in 2000, and the 2004 merger of the former policy analysis and policy management tracks of study into a single (MPA) program of study.

This assessment report has three parts:

- Identification of the mission of the La Follette School graduate program and the learning objectives that flow from this mission.
- Indicators that measure the degree to which the objectives have been achieved and a description of our assessment procedures

- Report on how we incorporate the findings of our assessment into the School's curriculum and program planning.

Mission and Learning Objectives

The fundamental mission of the La Follette School's graduate program is to prepare students for productive, successful, and satisfying careers in policy analysis and management. Our students take a variety of jobs after graduation: in government at the federal, state, and local levels; in nonprofit organizations; and in private organizations dealing with public policy. Although the positions for which we train students vary in disciplinary interests, policy focus, and in institutional character, the fundamental skills they need do not: expertise in the analysis of public policies (the problems government must solve, which options might work in solving them, and which options would prove most effective and efficient) and in the management of public programs (the organizational and procedural approaches to ensuring effective implementation).

To serve this mission, the La Follette School's graduate program has three objectives:

1. Provide a program that allows students to complete their training in a reasonable time. The La Follette graduate program is a professional program; its students are preparing for careers in the public service, and the program seeks to ensure that students can complete the program in a timely fashion.

2. Provide students with appropriate career-focused education that will accommodate the diversity in disciplines of the students attracted to public policy and in intended career paths.[1]

3. Provide students with education of long-term value. It is not enough simply to give students skills that help them obtain good jobs. To be of real and lasting merit, the program must give students both skills and a broader perspective that will give them a way of tackling problems whose dimensions cannot now even be imagined.

All students complete *foundational courses* that provide rigorous training in policy goals and values, in management skills, and in the collection and analysis of evidence used in the construction, implementation and conduct of public policy. Additional required *La Follette electives* provide core training in broad areas of policy

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[1] The majority of students who apply to the School have Bachelor degrees in political science, government, economics, or international affairs. The 165 applicants who met the January application deadline for financial aid consideration included 13 with Masters degrees. Some applicants have undergraduate or graduate degrees in business, history, languages, and increasingly in mathematics or the sciences. All accepted students have demonstrated knowledge of public policy with some experience in public affairs. Attracting an interdisciplinary student body is an intended goal of the acceptance decision.

expertise (e.g., environmental policy, social policy). Students structure *focus fields* that prepare them for jobs in specific policy or geographic areas (e.g., welfare reform, health policy, educational policy, Latin American studies). Development of rhetorical skills is an integral part of the curriculum, so writing exercises and presentations are part of most courses and a focus of a one-credit *Career Development* course taken by all first-year students.

Indicators

The following indicators are used to assess the graduate program's performance in meeting its goals and objectives:

1.   *Objective: Provide a program that allows students to complete their training in a reasonable time.*
     1.1.   Percent of students admitted who graduate. Most students admitted ought to complete the degree. Current graduation rates are above 90 percent. Of the 51 who entered the program in Fall 2003, 94 percent completed the degree. Only three of the 51 permanently withdrew from the program.
     1.2.   Time to degree. Completion rates in the two-year period are high. In May, 2005 41 of the 51 (80%) who entered the program in Fall 2003 were awarded the MPA/MIPA degree. The others were part-time or completed dual degree programs which required at least one additional year of study.
     1.3.   Percent of students provided financial support. As many students as possible, within the resources provided by or professional placements negotiated by the School, ought to receive financial support. The School has not systematically collected support data and only this year developed an on-line system for students to report on funding sources. Figure 2 reports on the sources of support in 2005-06 for those students who reported through the on-line system.

2.   *Objective: Provide students with appropriate career-focused education*
     2.1.   On-line exit interviews: On graduation, students can candidly provide feedback about what they liked about the program, and what suggestions for improvement they can make. These are compiled (though not in easily tabulated forms) and discussed by the faculty.
     2.2.   End of first year on-line interviews. After the first year, students can candidly provide feedback about what they liked about the program and services during the first year and make suggestions for improvements.
     2.3.   La Follette School Student Association (LSSA) discussions. A very active LSSA appoints one student to be the faculty-student liaison. The student attends faculty meetings and meets regularly with the Associate Director to review student concerns and to provide feedback on curriculum issues.

2.4. Alumni surveys. Many issues are often not apparent until students have some work experience. A survey is periodically emailed to alumni some few years after graduation that gather information on their work experience and usefulness of particular aspects of the La Follette School program.

2.5. Feedback from employers of students. The employers of the School's students during the academic year and as summer interns are a wealth of information about the skills students possess and which skills might most need to be further nurtured. Internships taken for credit require employer feedback.

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

3.1. Tracking of student post-graduate placements. Not all students seek the assistance of our Career Development Office. The Office tracks the placement search and success of students who do. Figure 3 shows the placement of graduating students by type of employer and by location. These data are for the approximately 70-80 percent of the graduating class who use placement services.

3.2. Tracking of alumni careers. Following the careers of alumni provides valuable information about what the La Follette program prepares them to do. The information is gathered from the School's existing alumni mailing list and periodic interviews of alumni. The School's alumni have over the years provided extremely valuable feedback about the program: which courses proved most valuable, what recommendations for improvement they would make. The School has a regular program of communicating with alumni through the La Follette School Alumni Association.

3.3. Analysis of feedback from alumni. All La Follette alumni regularly receive the La Follette School Alumni Newsletter. Alumni regularly submit unsolicited reactions and comments after receiving the newsletter.

Feedback

The data collected through this assessment plan, of course, have no value for their own sake. They are meaningful only as they help refine and polish the La Follette School graduate program. It is a program that, though the smallest of the top 23 programs both in number of students and faculty, is consistently recognized as outstanding in national surveys, especially in particular focus fields.

The feedback provided through the assessment plan will allow the School to:

- refine the School's curriculum to better meet the needs to its students.
- determine better how to connect the School's inputs (especially its faculty positions and student financial aid) with its goals and objectives.

- determine how best to address any problems that the assessment plan reveals. In particular, if the indicators show that the graduate program does not fully meet its objectives, the La Follette faculty and staff will carefully analyze the situation and
- determine factors under the School's control that can be adjusted, including course offerings, the content of courses, and administrative support from the School's student affairs and placement offices.

At its annual fall day-long retreat the School's faculty reviews each year:
- the results produced by the assessment plan
- draws conclusions about the School's success in meeting the objectives of its graduate program.
- develops a work plan for addressing needs and solving problems identified through the assessment process.

The Curriculum committee meets at least once during each semester and discusses
- sequencing of courses and staffing
- student suggestions for curriculum change
- satisfactory progress and focus field issues
- develops plans for additional course offering and hires

At its monthly faculty meeting the School's faculty
- hears a report from the Associate Director on student and curriculum issues
- invites the LSSA representative to report on students concerns or provide feedback on faculty proposals.

The next steps in this process are to refine the collection and tabulation of assessment data. This includes accurate enrollment data that includes joint degree students and accelerated students. We are working on improving tracking of students through the degree program in order to have better data on completion of degree and focus fields. We are working on linking admission data with student progress and student placement data so we can more easily tabulate the progress of each admitted student through the program and assess what characteristics associated with different levels of academic and placement success. At the moment admission data, academic data, and placement data are separately maintained.
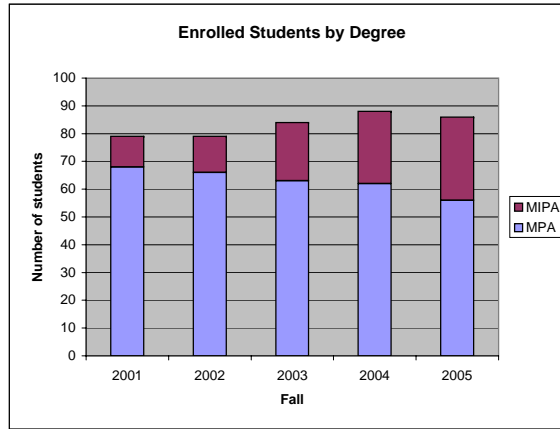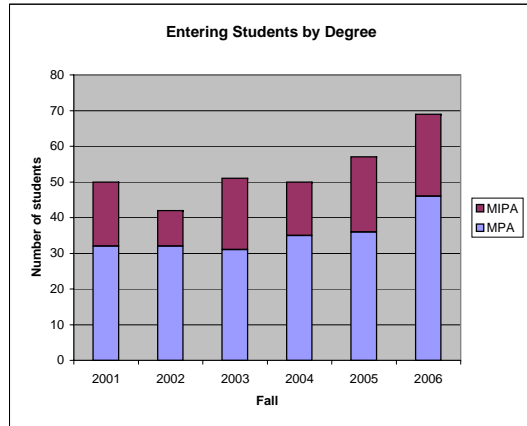
Submitted by

Karen C. Holden
Associate Director, La Follette School of Public Affairs
Professor of Public Affairs and Consumer Science
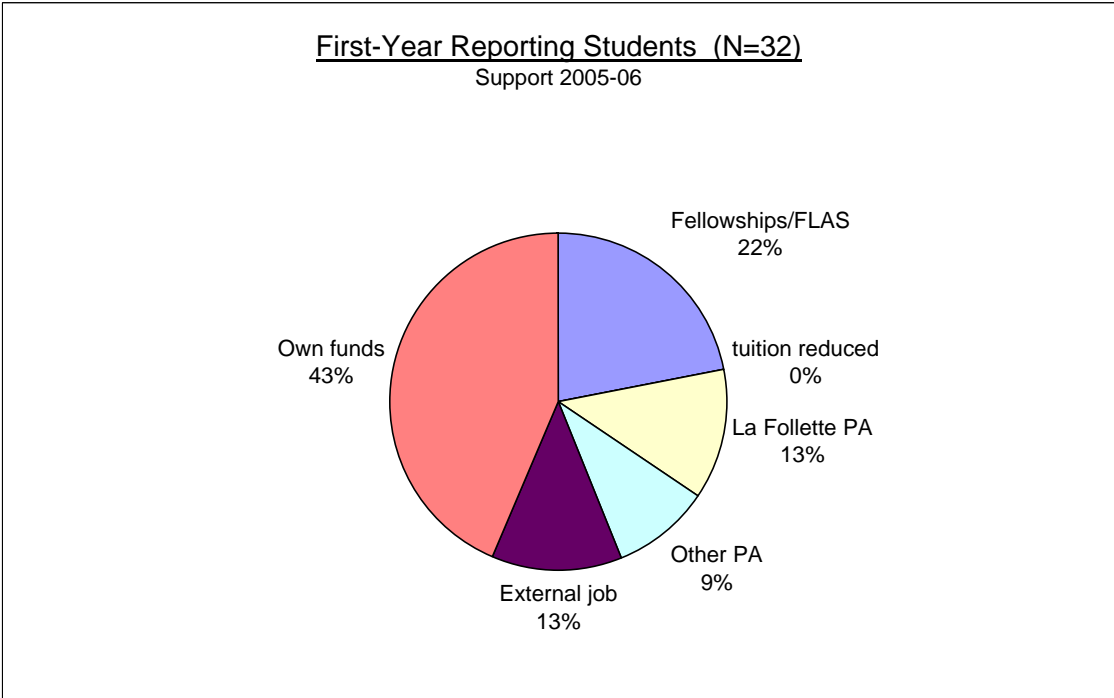263-9283

Figure 1: ENROLLMENT IN MPA AND MIPA DEGREE

Entering Students by Degree

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2005
MPA	32	32	31	35	36	46
MIPA	18	10	20	15	21	23
Total	50	42	51	50	57	69

Enrolled Students by Degree

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
MPA	68	66	63	62	56
MIPA	11	13	21	26	30
Total	79	79	84	88	86

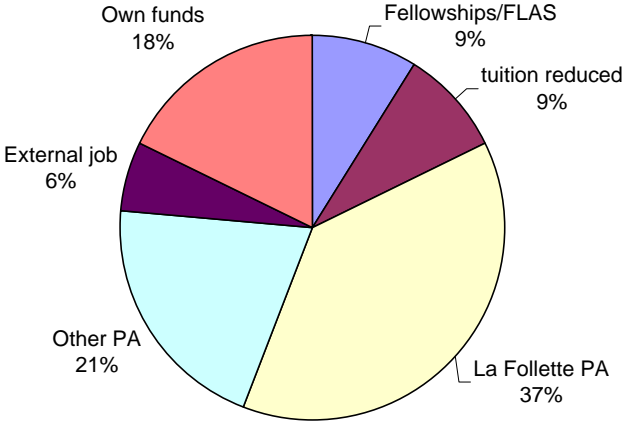Entering Students by Degree

Enrolled Students by Degree

Note: Enrolled student data exclude Joint law degree students and accelerated students. These account for about 12 students each year.

Figure 2: SUPPORT SOURCES, MPA & MIPA STUDENTS

First-Year Reporting Students (N=32)
Support 2005-06

Fellowships/FLAS
22%

tuition reduced
0%

La Follette PA
13%

Other PA
9%

External job
13%

Own funds
43%

Second Year Reporting Students (N= 34)
Support 2005-06

Own funds
18%

Fellowships/FLAS
9%

tuition reduced
9%

La Follette PA
37%

Other PA
21%

External job
6%

Figure 3: Placements of Graduating Students
Agency type and location

Agency Type of Graduate Placements

Agency Location/Type

■ 2002 ■ 2003 □ 2004 □ 2005

Wisc   D.C.   Other States   Non U.S.

■ 2002 ■ 2003 □ 2004 □ 2005