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Faculty Speaker, Commencement

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Graduation Talk: 2009

Then and Now: The Great Transition

I am very flattered to have been chosen by you—the La Follette class of 2009—to be your faculty speaker; thank you.

As a group, you have come far. I remember you well in the first days of 880, perhaps your first La Follette School class. Then, only a few of you were self-confident, believing you had made the right choice; today only a few of you are not. Then, nearly all of you feared economics and statistics; now you toss around words like ‘elasticity’, ‘externalities’, and ‘standard errors’ as if you grew up with them.

Over the past two years, then, you have learned the techniques of policy analysis, and how to apply them to concrete policy proposals and issues. You learned that every policy change carries both social gains and social losses, and that marginal effects matter.

You learned that identifying the effects of policy changes that are socially relevant is often tricky, and that simply pointing out components of gains and losses is not enough—scientific evidence, rational analysis, and the quantitative measurement of costs and benefits are important in public deliberations.

Then, you thought there was a right answer to questions regarding management and implementation; now, you understand that in many cases, there is no single correct answer, but rather several possible answers, each with pros and cons. You have learned that while different values, beliefs and perceptions may lead to different management approaches, some strategies stand little chance of being effective. You learned that competition, incentives, and contracts matter, and that performance can be measured in trying to attain accountability.

You learned about ethics in public affairs, about domestic and global institutions that influence policy-making, and about international considerations that both open opportunities and impose constraints on policy. Governments, you have seen, now need to work openly and collaboratively with a wide variety of non-governmental organizations, including charities, development interests, community groups, faith-based organizations, business and professional associations, and a wide variety of coalitions and advocacy groups.

You learned how hard it is to develop a sound and coherent policy recommendation, even on small issues that seem straightforward. And, you learned how hard it is to work in a collaborative team to prepare a single report.

With all of this now under your belt, you are ready to pass from grad student to public affairs professional. But, all is not entirely rosy. You are entering the most difficult job market in decades, and as a result many of you have not yet settled on the position that you desire, and you are uncertain about the future. You recall from 880 that uncertainty decreases wellbeing; it is costly!!

I urge you to not be discouraged by this start to your professional life. And, parents, don't you be discouraged either. Economic downturns have always led to upturns, and this one will as well. Over the long haul, with your abilities and the skills that you have gained at the La Follette School, you will do just fine, thank you. Just keep plugging.

When you do make that jump into the professional world, I hope that the truly basic principles that you encountered at La Follette will not be forgotten. To reduce the chances that this happens, I'd like to simply remind you of some of them; here they are!

First, the primary objective of public policy—and hence your objective—is to maximize social welfare. While easy to say, it is hard to do. Citizens have varying preferences, and it is difficult to assign different weights to different people. In my view, the efficiency principle of 880 fame—'maximum net benefits'—is not a bad approximation. Say "Yes" to those choices for which the willingness of beneficiaries to pay exceeds the social costs associated with the choice.

Second, every policy change creates winners and losers, and this fact must be kept front and center in your thinking. Who are the winners; are they rich or are they poor; are they powerful or are they weak? Who is bearing the cost, and what are their characteristics? Is this pattern of gains and losses consistent with policymakers' goals; if not, can the outcome be altered so that results better conform to objectives? Equity considerations—empathy—also matters.

Third, don't neglect the spillover effects of the choices at issue. It is easy to focus on the direct impacts of any policy or program, both those on the cost side and those on the benefit side. But, the hidden costs and gains may often exceed those direct effects. This is especially true in the policy areas on which this society will be concentrating over the next several years—energy, environment, health care, education, and revitalizing a sagging economy.

Finally, as a professional, your choices should be consistent with the objectives of the organization for which you work. These may differ from your own preferences. If you work for a government, a not-unlikely outcome, the objectives will be politically determined. You may not like some of the goals of any particular administration, but in a democracy those objectives have standing. Unfortunately, unless you are an elected official, yours don't.

Finally, I and my faculty colleagues admire you for the progress you have made, and the skills that you have gained. We have truly enjoyed working with, and knowing you, and are proud to send you on your way as policy analysts and public managers. We congratulate you, and we hope that you will stay in touch with us and remain part of the La Follette School community!!