

Beyond the Case Method in Public Affairs Education: Unexpected Benefits of Student-Written Cases

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ABSTRACT

The case method is a proven pedagogical strategy in public affairs education but it requires the use of relevant and realistic cases to which students can relate. Absent this condition, faculty must innovate. This article presents instructor experiences using a pedagogical approach of student-written instructor-facilitated (SWIF) cases at graduate public affairs programs at three Colombian universities. Applying a common evaluation instrument in each instructor's course, we identify additional strengths of SWIF case pedagogy beyond initial expectations and beyond the usual benefits of the case method. The lessons from these courses suggest benefits to students' developing their own cases as a means of making sense of the challenges particular to their own contexts. These observations and findings lead to recommendations for public affairs teaching more generally.

KEYWORDS

Case method, Colombia, pedagogy, student-written cases, Latin America

One of the most important and widely accepted pedagogies within a variety of professions, including public affairs, is the case method. Although not without its critics, the case method has been demonstrated to improve the ability of students to apply theory to practice, generate new theories grounded in practice, appreciate the complexity of decisions, engage in ethical reasoning, and develop communication and interpersonal skills. These skills are important for public administration professionals through-

out the world, but they are arguably particularly important in Latin America, where the social problems associated with vast income inequalities, the demand for economic development tempered by concern for preservation of natural and cultural resources, and the pressures of globalization must be addressed within weak institutional systems and widespread corruption.

Realizing the full potential of the case method requires cases that present problems and allow

the application of theory to practical situations that are realistic and relevant. A challenge for professors teaching public affairs in various regions and countries of the world is the absence of relevant cases available in the case banks where teachers of public affairs usually find their course materials. The lack of appropriate cases is particularly notable in South America and even more pronounced for Colombia, where very few cases are set and where the unique historical, geographic, political, economic, and social characteristics make cases set in other contexts of limited value.

A long-term solution to the scarcity of cases for teaching public affairs education in particular countries or regions is to promote the production of cases. As instructors, we devised an alternative, short-term solution: asking our students to write cases that can be used to bring the real world into the classroom.

The use of case writing in undergraduate and graduate education has received considerably less attention than using the case method in teaching (Bengtsson & Asplund, 2007; Bailey, Sass, Swiercz, Seal, & Kayes, 2005; Greenwalt, 1994; Lincoln, 2006). In a self-published online resource about student-written instructor-facilitated (SWIF) case writing, Swiercz (n.d.)—who may have coined the SWIF label—describes how to use the pedagogy of SWIF case writing to expand student engagement beyond the role of analysts to also that of researchers, interviewers, negotiators, writers, editors, and team members. In this process, the instructor serves as a coach and advisor, facilitating the process of researching and writing the case. Swiercz (n.d., pp. 2–3) asserts seven benefits of SWIF cases: integrating theory and practice; building tolerance for ambiguity and incompleteness; developing critical thinking skills; learning to distinguish between the significant and the trivial; developing shared learning skills; providing opportunity for original thought; and developing writing skills, however Swiercz provides no empirical evidence of these benefits. We found only two articles in peer-reviewed journals that present evidence of how

the SWIF case pedagogy contributes to enhancing students' diagnostic skills when working with clients, in one case with mental health disorders (Jones & Woodruff, 2008) and in another with substance abuse problems (Jones & Russell, 2007). By systematically analyzing our experiences across several courses, our goal is to better document the relative strengths and weaknesses of the SWIF case pedagogy for public affairs education and to inform others in our field.

We each independently decided to use the SWIF case pedagogy and then later came together to compare and contrast our experiences. A set of related questions drive our investigation, specifically:

1. Does having students write cases (the short-term solution to the lack of relevant cases) have the same advantages as using the traditional case method?
2. What are students' perceptions of the SWIF case strategy?
3. Are there any additional or different advantages to using SWIF cases relative to using prepared cases?

To answer these questions, this article compares our three experiences with SWIF cases. We document how we applied SWIF case pedagogy in graduate-level classes at three universities in two cities in Colombia. We begin with a review of the literature on the case method and its application in public affairs education, followed by a more detailed explanation of the need for context-specific cases for teaching in Colombia. We then briefly describe our three courses and how we each structured the SWIF cases, to illustrate similarities and differences among our approaches. Following that, we present the results of a common evaluation instrument used in all three courses to gather student feedback on the SWIF case experience. We conclude by sharing lessons learned—both expected and unanticipated—and their implications for the teaching of public affairs and for the increasing real-world demand for competent public officials.

THE CASE METHOD

Conventionally, students receive information from the professor in the form of a lecture and they are expected to internalize the information through memorization. Within professional disciplines, this method often fails to capture the attention and interest of midcareer students and, more importantly, fails to instill the necessary problem-solving competencies. The case method is a more active learning approach. Cases challenge learners with problems set in complex, real-world situations. In contrast to the more traditional and still widely used lecture format, the case method shifts students from the role of passive recipient of information to active and engaged participant in learning.

Cases are also distinct from traditional problem-solving assignments in that they have no one correct solution or answer. Each case is a description of a real situation and illustrates the complexity and interconnectedness of factors that might otherwise appear simple when considered in isolation. Working individually or in groups, students must analyze and take ownership of the problems; frame them in the context of the course material and corresponding literature, relevant theories, and professional values; and evaluate the varied alternatives for how to respond. Cases are “a vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom ... [and a] record of complex situations that must be literally pulled apart and put together again before the situations can be understood” (Lawrence, 1953, p. 215).

The case method has a long history, albeit in slightly different forms, in the teaching of law, medicine, and business management (Lynn, 1999). Harvard Law School instituted the case method of teaching in the 1870s, and all leading law schools followed suit in the early 1900s (Kimball, 1995). In medicine, teaching students to diagnose and treat using individual patient cases is a common pedagogical strategy to prepare for clinical practice (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). As early as 1919, business faculty at Harvard University recognized the need for new teaching methods to encourage creativity and problem solving; they have since played a leading role in both developing the

case method for that discipline and housing an extensive bank of cases (Spangler McBride, 1984). The case method spread to public administration in the 1930s and 1940s and then to education in the 1950s (Merseeth, 1996).

Case-based teaching is widely accepted as an effective instructional pedagogy, one that promotes a learner’s critical thinking skills and results in higher levels of student satisfaction and improved learning (Michel, Cater, & Varela, 2009; Salemi, 2002). Studies of effectiveness of the case method encompass undergraduate and graduate levels and span multiple disciplines (Kim et al., 2006). The case method has been shown to contribute to proficiencies and creativity among undergraduate economics students (Salemi, 2002), improved learning outcomes and greater ability to apply theory to practice among management and business students (Christensen & Carlile, 2009; Michel, Cater, & Varela, 2009), and better clinical problem solving among medical students (Stjernquist & Crang-Svalenius, 2007). The case method has also been shown to help nursing students develop a more holistic perspective and enhanced capacity for cooperation (Forsgren, Christensen, & Hedemalm, 2014) and to improve technical understanding and better interpersonal skills among software engineering students (Razali & Zainal, 2013). The case method helps teachers develop more effective classroom management and curriculum reform strategies (Merseeth, 1996; Walen & Williams, 2000) and helps architecture students see the interconnections among diverse specialties within their profession (Spangler McBride, 1984).

In the context of public administration, the case method has become fundamental to teaching public management (Feldman & Khademan, 1999) and is extensively used in the teaching of public policy (Chetkovich & Kirp, 2001). The case method can help students assess management efforts, strategize and make decisions (Feldman & Khademan, 1999), appreciate ethical dilemmas, and exercise “moral imagination” (Winston, 2000). Case-based learning has been identified as an effective strategy for developing the increasingly important skills of collaborative governance, particularly when the

cases are presented to students using a prospective, phased approach in which the case unfolds in a series of stages (Morse & Stephens, 2012) rather than using the more common retrospective approach in which students read the entire case at once. The use of cases within public affairs education has become even more valuable as the practice of public management has shifted from top-down bureaucracy and control using traditional POSDCORB (Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting) management techniques within government agencies to more emphasis on networks, collaboration, influence, and persuasion across multiple sectors.

Cases can help public management and public policy students develop skills in identifying and recognizing problems, understanding and interpreting data, distinguishing between assumptions and inferences versus facts, thinking analytically and critically, understanding and assessing interpersonal relationships, exercising judgment, communicating ideas and opinions, and making and defending decisions. Cases also help public policy professors balance the “traditional positivist approach grounded in rationality, objectivity, and economics” with the “postpositivist approach grounded in politics, subjectivity, and democracy” by illustrating the fusion of pragmatism and politics (Foster, McBeth, & Clemons, 2010, p. 517).

To be sure, cases and case teaching have also received considerable criticism. Social scientists in particular fault the method for being atheoretical and, hence, lacking in intellectual rigor. Contemporary cases are also faulted for implicitly endorsing an “activist” or “heroic” view of public management, for focusing primarily on high-ranking officials as protagonists, for ignoring the role of community collaboration, and for giving minimal attention to issues of race, class, and gender (Chetkovich & Kirp, 2001; Kenney, 2004). Whereas cases from the 1940s and 1950s portray a functional view of public managers, recent cases portray managers as people who actively shape their legal mandates and use administrative systems to promote political objectives, an image that may not match the reality that students will encounter in their public service careers. Cases also place demands

on the instructor in terms of preparation time, the challenge of finding appropriate cases, and the need for well-developed classroom management and group facilitation skills (Williams, Whiting, & Adler, 2014).

While much of the research about the effectiveness of the case method has focused on the U.S. context, there are some studies of the case method in other countries. Apaydin (2008) suggests that the case method using U.S. cases is appropriate for management education in Turkey in large part because the business education and business principles in that country are largely modeled after the United States. Similarly, Dixit et al. (2005), determine that the case method in management education in India will continue to thrive and be a mainstay but also needs to be revamped to respond to changing technologies. Rebeiz (2011) provides advice on the application of the case method for business teaching in China. In both the Indian and Chinese contexts, the emphasis is on using cases from both the United States and the respective country. Comparative cases have value when teaching in a cross-national context, enabling students to assess the extent to which problems or solutions from one country apply to another. There is evidence of growing reliance on cases within the Mexico context as well (Camacho Gomez, Munoz Aparicio, & Ancona Alcocer, 2012), using cases developed specifically for that country. There is a small but growing Spanish-language literature on the use of the case method (see, e.g., Andreu, González, Labrador, Quintanilla, & Ruiz, 2004; Vazquez, 2007; Wasserman, 1999).

Cases vary considerably in length, detail, purpose, and complexity. They are most often written, but a growing number are in video or multimedia formats. A case may focus on a single individual, decision, policy, or organization or on an entire community, region, or nation. For teaching purposes, a case must be relevant, realistic, engaging, challenging, and linked to instructional goals (Kim et al., 2006). Cases should force students to determine what is at stake, differentiate between fact and opinion, identify normative or ethical issues, and identify alternatives available (Gini, 1985). The best cases

are based on real places, events, and people; they are carefully researched; and they contain information that serves as a basis for discussion and learning by others (Merseeth, 1996).

To be effective, case studies must be as realistic as possible, and that means they must be contextually relevant. International cases, including those set in the United States, have value; but they risk leading students to draw inappropriate comparisons or make unrealistic recommendations, just as policy makers have done in real life. The historical account of M. L. Wilson, Harold Ware, and Guy Riggan sitting in a hotel room in Chicago in 1928 and planning “a huge mechanized wheat farm of some 500,000 acres of virgin land” in the Soviet Union, and the subsequent failures of that plan, illustrate the fundamental flaw associated with assuming that the key issues are “abstract, technical interrelationships” that are “context-free” (Scott, 1998, pp. 200–201). While it is true that cases set in other contexts can provide the basis for comparison and reflection on similarities and differences, the most useful cases are those set in contexts that students can relate to and that reflect their professional realities. For someone teaching in public management, public policy, or related courses in Colombia, locating appropriate cases—that is, cases set in Colombia and reflecting Colombian political, social, and economic conditions—is challenging.

THE SEARCH FOR CASES TO USE IN COLOMBIA

As mentioned earlier, as instructors we were motivated to use a SWIF case approach based on our inability to locate appropriate cases set in a Colombian context. Independently, we looked for cases on local government management challenges in Colombia, inter-sectoral and intergovernmental relations in Colombia, and leadership in Colombia that would facilitate the application of theories of decentralization, new public management, state building, public choice, and leadership, among others. Individually, we were unsuccessful in locating cases we considered appropriate for our respective courses. It was not until we came together to analyze our experiences as part of this collaborative research effort that we conducted a more systematic review of case availability.

Several online sites offer cases designed specifically for public affairs education, most of which are based in the United States and practically none of which provide cases that address the unique conditions and needs of Colombia (based on a search we conducted in May 2014). Among the approximately 2,000 cases in the case bank of Harvard’s prestigious John F. Kennedy School of Government, only 5 are set in Latin America and none are in Colombia. Of the approximately 125 cases found in Electronic Hallway based out of the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington and the 48 multimedia cases found in the Hubert Project at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, none deal with South America or Colombia. Additionally, among the limited number of cases set in Colombia in these case banks, none are in Spanish, thus suggesting they are intended more for an English-speaking audience outside Colombia than for those within the country.¹

Even within a bank of cases housed in Latin America and with a more explicit Latin American focus, there are limited resources set in Colombia. Of the approximately 640 cases in the Centro Internacional de Casos (CIC) compiled and maintained by the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education (ITESM, its Spanish abbreviation), only 23 take place in South America, and only 19 cases deal with Colombia.

THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

The particular characteristics of any country, city, or region should always be a consideration in selecting a case study. This is particularly important in a country such as Colombia, whose pressing and unique characteristics demand the use of context-specific cases for the teaching of public affairs. As in many countries in Latin America, public affairs professionals in Colombia must contend with the presence of corruption and a strong culture of illegality. Beyond these attributes common to many Latin American countries, several characteristics are particularly important in Colombia.

It is essential that public affairs students understand and appreciate the vast regional diversity of the country, not only in terms of geographic characteristics, but also in terms of culture, language, standard of living, and institutional capacity. The Constitution of 1991 transfers considerable power and responsibility from the national government to the territories. As such, Colombia is characterized by a higher degree of decentralization compared to other Latin American countries, and this implies an implementation process that is highly differentiated according to variations in institutional capacity and local arrangements. *Per capita* income varies tremendously among regions, some rivaling the poverty of Haiti and others on par with the richest states of Brazil and Argentina. The differences in wealth create vast disparities in need, distribution of resources, and capacities to implement public policies. Decentralization in Colombia exists in an environment of minimal national oversight or supervision and considerable political fragmentation and clientelism (Leyva, 2011). Colombia has a strong electoral tradition and a recently expanded set of political parties, but both are driven by a high degree of personalism (Botero & Raga, 2009).

Colombia is also unique in the extent to which the courts are involved in the elaboration of public policy (Rodríguez Garavito, 2010). The courts have taken an active role prescribing how the central and local governments must behave toward, for example, beneficiaries of public housing in the late 1990s, recipients of health care after a big legal reform in 2007, and victims and refugees from the internal armed conflict in 2004. The Constitutional Court's actions have created important changes in both implementation and supervision, although their impact reaches only a limited number of cases and their success varies greatly across different policy fields, variations that are severely under-researched in the country.

In addition, Colombia's more than 50-year history of armed conflict permeates the development and implementation of public policy, and cases that ignore that reality neglect an essential characteristic. The influence of the Fuerzas Armadas

Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and other guerrilla groups as well as the paramilitary forces is felt throughout the country; but in certain localities and regions, one or more of these groups have had greater levels of influence to the point of sometimes directly influencing policy-making given the differentiated presence of state institutions (González, 2003). In some territories, these groups have played a more important role than the state in providing public services such as security and justice, even though their role is difficult to capture in official statistics. At the same time, armed conflict in a number of regions has made the implementation of policies to improve health and education almost impossible.²

SWIF CASES FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN COLOMBIA: MOTIVATION AND METHODOLOGY

In our teaching, we each confronted the problem of the lack of relevant cases, and we each independently opted for the short-term solution of having our students write cases with guidance and support from us as instructors. Although we were motivated by similar considerations—namely the lack of relevant cases within existing case banks—we each selected this pedagogical strategy independently and without knowledge of what the others were doing. We also implemented the strategy in slightly different ways tailored to our courses. Despite the independent genesis of the idea and the individualized implementation, we had remarkably similar experiences and reached similar conclusions about the value of this pedagogical approach, in terms of both expected and unanticipated benefits. Because we realized what the others were doing before the end of the semester, we were able to apply a common evaluation instrument and compare student experiences in the three courses.

Our goals for the SWIF case method were twofold: (1) to create opportunities in which students could apply course materials to situations and circumstances relevant to their professional lives; and (2) to use these cases as teaching tools within our classes to help students apply theories and develop management and leadership strategies. Interestingly, our short-term solution

seems to have added pedagogical value to our courses. None of us selected this pedagogical approach expecting any benefits beyond those associated with the case method generally; in fact, we somewhat doubted that student-written cases could take the place of published cases. All three of us were surprised by the additional value generated by the pedagogy.

The three settings in which we utilized SWIF cases were in public affairs programs at the graduate level at three private universities in the two largest cities in Colombia. Each course had between 25 and 30 students enrolled, all courses were taught between January and June 2014, and all were taught in Spanish. Table 1 provides a summary of the settings.

The common elements of a SWIF experience are that the students are responsible for researching and writing the case and the instructor facilitates the process. Instructor facilitation is crucial. The faculty facilitation role includes providing guidance in selecting an appropriate topic and setting, ensuring that it is neither too broad nor too narrow and that it relates to the course themes and theories. Writing a good case requires that students not rely solely on previously published sources; as such, faculty facilitation involves helping students identify appropriate people to interview and data to analyze and guiding them in evalu-

ating the credibility of information received from those sources. Invariably, students will encounter problems while gathering data and writing the case, and the instructor-facilitator assists in resolving those problems. Finally, as the individual with the greatest understanding of the theories, core concepts, and learning objectives of the course, the instructor has a responsibility to ask probing questions and offer suggestions about how to link the case to relevant theories, beyond an obvious or superficial level.

Each instructor designed the SWIF cases somewhat differently to meet the learning objectives of the course. In providing guidance to students about the case-writing process, we relied on the many resources that exist for faculty interested in case writing (see, e.g., Heath, 2002; Leenders, Mauffette-Leenders, & Erksine, 2001; Naumes & Naumes, 2006), and we adapted our instructions for our particular assignments. Based on the needs of the course and the preferences of the instructor, the SWIF case experiences varied in terms of whether cases were prepared individually or in groups; the case topic criteria; the processes students used to research, write, edit and reflect on their cases; and the final products submitted to the instructor for a grade. Table 2 highlights distinguishing characteristics of the SWIF cases in each course setting.

TABLE 1.
Settings for the Use of SWIF Cases

University	Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá	Universidad EAFIT, Medellín	Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá
Academic unit	College of Political Science and International Relations	Department of Government and Political Science	Alberto Lleras Camargo School of Government
Degree program	Specialization in Government and Territorial Public Management ^a	Master of Government and Public Policy	Master of Public Policy
Course	Seminar in Public Management I	Seminar in Territorial Management Problems	Strategy and Leadership in Public Organizations
Number of students	25	29	28

^aSpecializations (*especializaciones*, in Spanish) are common in Colombia and similar to executive education master's degrees. They generally are offered in intensive weekend formats, are completed within a single year, and have slightly fewer credits and more of a practitioner emphasis than many master's degrees.

As mentioned earlier, although each of us selected the SWIF case pedagogy independently, we came together in time to prepare and administer a common evaluation instrument. We asked all students in each course the following questions:

1. What was your initial reaction when you learned that you would have to write a case?
2. What did you find most valuable about this experience?
3. What was most difficult about this experience?
4. What additional information would have been useful to improve the process and the results?
5. What knowledge or skills do you have now that you did not have prior to this experience?

Each of us also had the opportunity to tailor the evaluation to meet our particular needs by adding questions. Those additional questions asked about initial expectations (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana and Universidad de los Andes), preferences for individual or group work if writing a case in the future (Javeriana), perceptions of advantages and disadvantages of the pedagogy (Universidad EAFIT), and the most surprising aspect of the experience (Los Andes).

Although completion of the evaluation was voluntary in all three courses, we had response rates of 100%, 86%, and 79% at Javeriana, EAFIT, and Los Andes, respectively. The use of the common assessment tool enables comparison of the various SWIF case strategies used by the three instructors. All questions were open-ended, and thus responses were in narrative

TABLE 2.
SWIF Case Assignment Characteristics

University	Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá	Universidad EAFIT, Medellín	Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá
N cases	1	1	2
Individual or group	Group cases researched and written in teams of five students, the teams assigned by the instructor to balance experience and geographic representation	Group cases researched and written in teams of three students	Individual cases, using peer groups of three students for feedback
Parameters for topic selection	Teams had to select one of three thematic areas: (1) collaboration among levels of government and/or between government and nongovernmental/civil society/nonprofit organizations; (2) promoting transparency, accountability, citizen participation, democratic processes, managing for results, and/or ethical conduct; or (3) sustainable economic development in Colombian territories while respecting diversity, multiculturalism, individual dignity, and the challenges of reconciliation in the transition to post-conflict and peace.	Students selected from two types of cases: (1) regional studies of intergovernmental relations/management with a focus on patronage capture of programs, nonprogrammatic distribution policy, and coordination problems arising from dispersed authority and a general lack of supervision; (2) local studies on the political capture of local government, looking at whether NGO processes and burgeoning democracy, either consolidate the supply and quality of public administration, or instead accentuate political capture and poor institutional quality.	Each student wrote two personal cases: (1) a case of past leadership failure; (2) a current case of leadership challenge. The purpose of the leadership failure case was for students to identify an experience where they wanted and could have changed an undesirable status quo in a human system that they belong to but were not successful. The current leadership case required students to choose a leadership challenge they were facing, in which it would be useful for them to make progress during the semester.

TABLE 2.
SWIF Case Assignment Characteristics

University	Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá	Universidad EAFIT, Medellín	Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá
N cases	1	1	2
General goals	Regardless of topic, teams were expected to focus on using the case to illustrate importance, opportunities, and challenges and the extent to which public management theories applied. Teams were required to select a situation based in a Colombian municipality or region in which the public management actions and outcomes—successful, partially successful, or failed—could be analyzed and evaluated using the theories of the course.	Students were expected to enrich their reflection and critical analysis of Colombian public administration as it related to theories of the separation of politics and administration, decentralization, public choice, new public management, state building, and democratic transitions.	The cases were part of a broader pedagogy of creating secure spaces in which students could practice leadership, defined either as a set of experiments and strategic actions directed toward mobilizing people and resources to make progress in complex collective challenges or as opportunities to improve. The cases sought to allow students to practice and develop different analytical, emotional, and social skills useful for leadership.
Guidelines for case development	The instructor assigned students to teams to reflect common interests in issues and diversity of work experiences and geography. Teams had class time for team meetings and division of labor, and did required additional work outside of class. The case site was to be based where at least one team members could engage in interviews and original source document review. There were multiple opportunities for instructor and peer feedback.	The instructor presented students with theory and cases developed by other students in previous classes. Students were required to travel to the case sites and do fieldwork and conduct interviews so the work was not entirely theoretical. A series of different analyses were required for each case, applying various theories and methodologies from the course. Three class sessions were dedicated to counseling and guidance on the cases.	For both cases, the instructor provided students with a guiding set of questions. Students brought a copy of the case to class and worked in peer groups of three, randomly assigned. Peer groups followed strict rules of engagement and time limits for presentation and feedback. Peers engaged in a process of rediagnosis and brainstorming. For the leadership failure case, students then submitted a second part of the case in which they discussed lessons learned from writing the case, how their perceptions changed based on working with peers, and their perceptions of the value of the entire exercise as a learning tool to develop leadership competencies. For the current leadership challenge case, students presented their cases during class so the entire group could analyze the case, rediagnose it, and apply course concepts.
Final products	Written case accompanied by an “instructor’s guide” with related readings, discussion questions, and supporting materials Class presentation to discuss the application of theory to the case	Written case Presentation to the class followed by discussion	Two written cases and substantial class discussion and written reflection on the cases

format. Each instructor thematically coded the qualitative data within each individual question and across all responses. We placed student responses into categories representing the attitudinal sentiment and/or substantive focus of the comment. Summary results are presented in Table 3.

This process of categorizing student responses and portraying them side by side improves our ability to compare responses across the three courses, however our comparisons are made within a framework of acknowledged differences. We did not force the responses into the same categories across the three courses. Given the distinct course objectives and unique structure of the SWIF case assignments in each course, it would be inappropriate to aggregate the responses. Additionally, the numbers reported are intended to give a sense of patterns rather than serve as the basis for quantitative analysis or tests of statistical significance.

In relying on student evaluations, we must contend with the same challenges as any other course evaluation tool associated with the inherent power differential between student and professor: the potential for students to report what they think the instructor wants to hear or to be concerned that negative comments will adversely affect their grades. We took reasonable precautions to minimize these risks. In all three settings, evaluations were anonymous and voluntary. The Los Andes course offered an added measure of protection for students through an informed consent form distributed at the beginning of the course, letting students know that they were participating in research and providing them the opportunity to opt out without any consequence; this option was offered in large part because of the highly personal nature of this course's case-writing assignments. Additionally, we advised students in all three courses that we, as instructors, wanted and needed their candid feedback about the SWIF case pedagogy in order to inform our decisions about whether to use it again in the future.

In the Javeriana and EAFIT contexts, the students were midcareer practitioners with sufficient experience to allow them to adequately gauge whether the new and different pedagogical approach was contributing to their knowledge and skill base. Midcareer students are generally not shy about expressing their discontent if they find materials or methods to be insufficiently relevant to the demands of their professional positions. In the Los Andes course, the cases were inherently personal and required self-reflection; thus these cases were evaluated partly based on their reference to appropriate theories, models, and concepts from the course and partly through self-assessments. The latter was a legitimate and essential form of evaluation given the personal nature of the assignment. In the findings that follow, we supplement student comments with our own observations and assessments of the quality of their work and their performance in the courses. We offer these findings, not as definitive assessments of the SWIF case pedagogy, but rather as assessments of how the method worked in our three courses, which may be reinforced or challenged by further research in other contexts.

FINDINGS

Several notable findings emerge from the qualitative analysis of student responses, including (1) convergence toward positive final assessments of the SWIF case experience regardless of initial reactions; (2) different types of challenges depending on the SWIF case particulars, and, most importantly; (3) identification of acquired competencies that include and go beyond those usually associated with the case method. We discuss each finding in turn below, referring to data reported in Table 3.³

Finding 1: Regardless of Initial Reactions the Final Assessment Is Positive

When asked to describe their initial reactions upon learning that they would be writing their own cases and that this assignment would be a substantial portion of their course grade (50% at Javeriana, 60% at EAFIT, and 40% for the two cases combined at Los Andes), students used a variety of phrasings to describe their feelings. In the Javeriana and EAFIT courses,

TABLE 3.
Categorization of Student Responses to In-Common Questions Evaluating SWIF Case Experience

University	Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá	Universidad EAFIT, Medellín	Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá
Responses	25 of 25	23 of 29	24 of 28
Initial reaction	Positive = 22 Neutral = 1 Negative = 4	Positive = 16 Neutral = 0 Negative = 7	Positive = 11 Neutral = 6 Negative = 11
Most valuable	Working with diverse peers = 14 Applying theory to practice = 6 Getting to know a community = 4 Going from problems to solutions = 3 Other = 2	Sharing the cases = 8 Learning to locate information = 6 Time-consuming but productive = 4 Applying theory to practice = 3 Other = 2	Personal insights = 13 Sharing with others and getting feedback = 8 The learning and teaching methodologies of the course = 3
Most difficult	Coordinating group work = 8 Locating information = 6 Focusing and selecting a topic = 4 Short duration of course = 3 Writing the instructor's guide = 3 Nothing, it wasn't difficult = 2 Other = 2	Incorporating different types of analysis in a single case = 9 Getting the data = 6 Working in groups = 4 Other = 4	Self-reflection = 7 Sharing experiences with others = 6 Being honest/objective = 5 Getting used to the course environment = 3 Pushing myself to act/improve = 2 Nothing = 1
Additional information sought	None/information was sufficient = 7 Access to better data = 4 More examples of good cases = 4 Just need more time = 2 Other = 2	Detailed instructions at first class = 4 Access to the other groups' cases = 4 Access to statistics, maps, etc. = 3 Clarity on the methods of analysis = 2 Examples of similar cases = 2 Other = 6	None/information was sufficient = 13 More clarification on grading criteria = 4 More personal feedback from professor = 4 Other = 2
New knowledge or competencies acquired	Knowledge of topic and community = 7 Applying theory to practice = 5 Appreciation of complexity = 5 Improved analytical skills = 4 Ability to leverage group diversity = 6 Understanding Colombian diversity = 3 No response = 1	Applying theory to practice = 14 Improved analytical skills = 9	Value of reflection/introspection and sharing regarding self/past/options = 6 Emotional management tools = 6 Strategic action tools = 5 Applying theory to practice = 2 Ability to apply multiple perspectives = 2

Note. The evaluation was administered using paper at Javeriana and EAFIT and via online survey at Los Andes. Number of respondents may not equal number of students in the course because completion of the evaluation was optional. Because the questions were open-ended, it was possible for a student to provide more than one response to each question, thus total responses may exceed 100%. The "Other" category aggregates responses given by only one student that do not fit in any of the other categories.

we categorized a clear majority (88% and 70%, respectively) as having a positive initial reaction; these students used descriptions such as “excitement,” “opportunity,” and “recognition of the practical value” about their feelings, and they expressed an expectation that the experience would be “relevant,” “useful,” and “enriching.” We characterized a smaller but not insignificant number of student responses (16% and 30%, respectively) as negative reactions; these expressed trepidation and mentioned “concern about doing something I had never done before” or being “uncertain” or “nervous.” Perhaps due to the personal nature of the SWIF cases required of students in the Strategy and Leadership in Public Organizations course at Los Andes, nearly half (46%) of the students who completed the evaluation reported having negative reactions of anxiety and uncertainty about “exposing [themselves] to others” and “facing tough past experiences”; an equal proportion (46%) had positive initial reactions, similar to the students in the other courses.

Regardless of students’ initial reactions, there was near-unanimous positive assessment of the value of the SWIF case experience among those who completed the evaluation. This does not mean that students did not express criticisms but rather that every student also saw value in the pedagogy. Whether they began from a position of excitement and enthusiasm or one of nervousness and doubt, students finished their respective courses appreciative of what the process and the end product taught them. Across the three courses, 70 students (representing 99% of the students who completed the evaluation and 87% of all students enrolled) reported new knowledge or competencies which they attributed to the SWIF case experience. Students commented that “the experience allowed me to not only understand the situation and the problems of a particular policy, but also [have] the possibility to create solutions and possible alternatives to overcome the pressures and failures” and that “writing a case is a good way to make the theories real and to see how reality can be seen through the eyes of academia.” Even among the 11 students who expressed concerns about exposing their leader-

ship failures to their classmates at the start of the semester, all concluded with comments such as, “By writing cases, I could close old stories and acquire leadership skills” and “Sharing personal experiences with others brings new perspectives, allows you to see blind spots, helps you understand better, and it is liberating.”

Finding 2: Challenges of SWIF Cases Depend on Type of Case Assignment

Students in all three courses identified challenges associated with their respective SWIF case assignments, but the nature of those challenges differed depending on the course. Among the students at Javeriana and EAFIT universities, the most challenging aspects of the experience centered on locating reliable and current information needed for the case, working in groups, and having sufficient time to complete the requirements. In Colombia, many sources of information are not kept up to date. Information on Colombian municipalities may be located in disperse, not always obvious locations or may be nonexistent. Reports and data submitted to national government agencies sometimes exist but often are not current or accurate.⁴

Working in groups presented challenges related to balancing competing perspectives and coordinating the completion of the work. EAFIT students indicated that working with fellow students presented challenges of understanding different professional and personal perspectives and ideologies, which sometimes made it difficult to discuss complex and controversial subjects such as corruption, national authority, and patronage in public administration. For students at Javeriana, the challenges of group work centered less on their teammates’ points of view than on the logistics of coordinating group work; members of the group lived far from each other, some did not have reliable access to technology to communicate regularly between class meetings, and many had extensive work responsibilities and demands on their time. Notably, however, students also indicated that despite these difficulties, working in groups was worth the trouble; as one student described it, “More than being difficult, the experience [of working in a group] was very enriching.”

Thus, for example, while 8 students (35%) from Javeriana identified group work as the most difficult part of the SWIF case process, 14 (56%) indicated that working with their peers was the most valuable aspect of the experience; notably, the latter group includes 7 of the 8 from the former.

Students mentioned that time constraints created pressures from the earliest stages of selecting a case topic through the research, data analysis, writing, and presentation. This challenge was particularly keen at EAFIT, where students needed to apply several types of analysis to each case. The time challenges for students at Javeriana centered on the intensive weekend scheduling format of courses within the specialization; despite being provided designated time during class meetings, students reported difficulty completing tasks within the two-month time frame of the course.

Los Andes students faced somewhat different challenges. They focused on the difficulties associated with being honest and objective, writing about personal experiences, sharing experiences with others, and pushing oneself out of one's comfort zone. The majority (54%) of respondents from the Los Andes course were not able to identify any additional information they needed to write their cases, whereas 17% indicated a desire for more clarification of grading criteria and another 17% wanted more personalized feedback from the instructor.

When asked what additional information would have been most helpful, students at both Javeriana (16%) and EAFIT (13%) expressed frustration with the lack of reliable and accessible data to support their case research. A small number of students in all three courses indicated that it would have been helpful to receive examples of good Colombian case studies to illustrate the expectations (16%, 9%, and 5% at Javeriana, EAFIT and Los Andes, respectively). Only the instructor at EAFIT was able to provide examples from prior courses to illustrate expectations to students; all three instructors are hopeful that our use of the SWIF case process will allow us to share such examples with students in future semesters.

Finding 3: The SWIF Case Pedagogy Provides Intended and Unintended Benefits

For the purposes of our research, the most revealing evaluation questions were those that asked about the most valuable aspects of the SWIF case experience and students' perceptions of knowledge or competencies gained. While we acknowledge that students' perceptions of acquired skills does not constitute definitive evidence of competence, we note that their perceptions are supported by our own observations and assessments of their classroom interactions and the products they submitted. In selecting the SWIF case pedagogy, we had hoped simply to overcome the absence of published cases and find a way to realize the benefits of the case method. The student evaluations and our observations of the quality of work submitted indicate that the SWIF case approach not only provided the expected benefits of using cases but also contributed to important additional competencies among the students.

Javeriana students made reference to the value of working with and learning from their peers from other regions of the country (56%) and of acquiring a depth of knowledge of a topic and a community (28%). The EAFIT students emphasized application of theory to practice (61%) and analytical skills acquired (39%). The students from Los Andes found the personal insights most valuable (54%), and they reported that they developed skills in self-reflection (25%) and emotional management (25%).

Among the expected benefits noted were increased appreciation for the complexity of public problems specific to the Colombian context and an ability to apply theory to practice and to critically evaluate theories. Comments such as "I've learned and strengthened regional analysis from the viewpoint of public management and developed a sense of the influence of these in the development, implementation, monitoring, and control of development plans of the various local authorities" suggest an understanding of the Colombian context and its complexities. Another student noted,

The ability to think in practical terms is key. To theorize and search for bibliographic references that justify an argument is relatively easy. But to use these arguments to find why [a particular problem] is present in certain situations and not in others demands a higher level of complexity. The fact is that the case study puts one in a position to think about these things and it is an important benefit.

Sample student comments reflected an appreciation for the value of praxis: “the most valuable aspect of the experience was to be able to conduct a study to examine a particular problem and contribute to the community, organizations, and academia”; writing a case allowed us to “identify ways to bridge the gap between principles of governance and reality and to identify the challenges for effective participation”; “the case is a good way to apply the theoretical content and see how reality can be seen through the contributions of academia”; and “writing my cases gave me the opportunity to see the practical applications of the tools discussed in class and readings.” These student perceptions were reinforced by our observations and assessments. As instructors, we evaluated the written products submitted based on their reference to appropriate theories, models, and concepts from the course readings, and we were impressed with students’ ability to engage in critical analysis of the theories. We evaluated cases in all courses using rubrics that included a criterion related to integration and application of theory. The cases the students identified, researched, and wrote about provided opportunities to examine and critique various tenets of New Public Management, models of decentralization and public choice theory, and adaptive leadership theories and leadership as practice. As instructors, we found that students did this more effectively than we had experienced in other courses using a more conventional case method.

Among the unexpected benefits were a broader set of analytical skills, an increased appreciation of the value of diversity of perspectives and experiences, improved skills in active listening and collaboration, and greater appreciation for the importance of and ability to utilize emo-

tional intelligence. Analytical skills are also commonly associated with the case methodology in the sense that students must interpret the situation and analyze potential consequences of alternative courses of action. This was true for the SWIF cases as well, but this pedagogy also had the advantage of contributing to students’ research skills. Students reported that they “acquired new skills in making theoretical arguments and skills to propose improvements to different problems,” “new ways to engage in investigation,” and the ability to “flesh out ideas and present information relevant to understanding a subject.” As one student explained, “Before, I had a quick and everyday vision of behavior, and now I have the technical tools for a case analysis.”

In each of the courses, students mentioned the opportunity to learn from each other and a greater appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and experiences that their classmates brought to the case-writing process. One student indicated that “the most valuable thing was to learn from the lives of my colleagues and to better understand the situation in different regions of the country.” Other students emphasized the value of “working in groups, where different people from different regions and completely different professions united from the same point to investigate, analyze, and resolve a public management case” and the usefulness of “seeing another point of view from different experiences, which made me realize that I have much to learn and we have a huge responsibility in this respect.” On a more personal level, students referenced the value of “sharing with others to get different perspectives of myself, the challenge, and the system” and of “sharing an experience with others as a means of promoting personal and professional growth.”

Because the SWIF case exercise in the Javeriana course grouped students into teams, we also asked students to evaluate the group experience. Despite the challenges of working in groups with individuals living in distant and remote locations, 80% of students indicated a preference for completing this type of assignment in groups rather than individually. They cited the value of diversity of ideas, perspectives, and

experiences and the need to develop practical skills for the real world of work. Students characterized their written cases as being stronger, their personal experiences more enriching, and their analysis more critical and deep for having been completed in diverse groups. Only two students (less than 1%) expressed a desire to work alone if tasked with a similar case-writing assignment in the future.

Among the Los Andes students, 83% described the process in terms that suggest a level of self-reflection, self-control, and emotional intelligence, stating that the process contributed to the ability to “consciously regulate my level of frustration by properly evaluating my experiences” and to have greater “self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation.” Similarly, 50% of Los Andes students mentioned that the SWIF cases contributed to their strategic management skills; one student said that the process provided “tools to deal with groups, tools to identify and make alliances, and other leadership tools to achieve goals more easily.”

Students’ perceptions of the value of the SWIF case experience were also influenced by their understanding of how their cases could contribute to the development of a bank of cases for future use by others. We told students that, at a minimum, we would use their cases in subsequent semesters and that the cases might be submitted to an existing case bank or a new one. Students were motivated by the idea that their work could aid others in subsequent semesters. Both on the evaluations and in more informal conversations with instructors, students commented that they felt pride in doing something that might be of use to future public affairs students in Colombia and that also might help public affairs students elsewhere better understand the public management and policy challenges faced within Colombia. While we have yet to determine a strategy to bring to fruition this plan outside of our own courses, it remains a goal.

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS

As documented above, student responses to the SWIF case experience were largely positive.

Student comments suggest that the SWIF case pedagogy not only contributed to our short-term goal of having relevant Colombian cases to use in our teaching as well as all the usual benefits of the case method, but also generated additional benefits by virtue of students’ higher level of engagement. Students were forced to identify appropriate subjects for case studies in their organizations, communities, or their own professional experiences; engage in data collection through document and archival analysis and interviews; evaluate the relative quality and adequacy of the information they collected; analyze data using appropriate techniques; reflect on prior decisions and actions of themselves and others; and work collaboratively with their classmates either as part of a team or in providing feedback on individual SWIF case assignments. Despite some students’ initial trepidations about the SWIF case process, the final assessment was almost overwhelmingly positive. We acknowledge that this may be in part a function of the absence of assembled case studies in Colombia, and thus we present this finding as preliminary; more studies are needed in contexts where case studies already exist.

As instructors, we were also impressed by the quality of many of the cases produced by the students in terms of students’ ability to apply theoretical material and analytical tools from the course to the specific case, to present the case in a compelling and interesting way, and to reflect on their learning at macro and micro levels. We also see potential for these cases to be used in future courses to illustrate public management, public policy, and organizational leadership within a Colombian context.

Although this pedagogy was initially conceived of as a short-term alternative “fix,” each of us is inclined to use this pedagogy again based on the benefits realized. We will, of course, modify, refine, and improve the SWIF case process based on our own observations and student feedback, and we will use some of the cases written by students in as illustrations and examples. It is from that perspective that we offer recommendations for others engaged in the teaching of public affairs not limited to those in Colombia.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Based on our experiences, we have three recommendations for public affairs educators. Specifically, we recommend (1) that faculty might consider the SWIF case pedagogy even when formal cases already exist, if it supports their learning objectives, and that they learn from our experiences; (2) that existing and new case banks provide a venue for screening, publishing, and disseminating cases written by practitioner-students through SWIF processes, including those written in languages other than English; and (3) that public affairs programs, particularly those in developing countries with a shortage of cases, commit to a systematic process of case development and dissemination.

The SWIF case method is particularly useful when teaching in circumstances that present unique contextual factors not found among existing formal cases; however, our research suggests that this method should not be relegated to only those settings. Lack of cases may not be an issue for faculty teaching in developed countries or even in particular parts of Latin America, for example, in Mexico. For those experienced with the case method of teaching, the convenience, familiarity, and polish of published cases may be attractive. Our research suggests, however, that there may be additional benefits associated with the SWIF case process that are particularly appropriate and contribute to fundamental competencies needed for governance in the 21st century. Faculty interested in helping students enhance their teamwork, research, or self-reflection skills can tailor the SWIF case process to provide opportunities to practice while also realizing the typical benefits of the case pedagogy. Thus, if the learning objectives of the course include developing teamwork, gathering and interpreting original data, effective communication across diversity, empathy, and self-reflection, then the SWIF case pedagogy may be particularly appropriate.

The SWIF case pedagogy is not appropriate in all public affairs classes. Researching and writing cases requires a level of professionalism and experience that makes this method more suited

to a midcareer practitioner-student group than to an entirely preservice class. Additionally, the SWIF case pedagogy requires the faculty member to assume the role of an engaged facilitator who provides guidance but allows students to make choices and who responds to issues as they arise, rather than dictating the learning sequence and outcomes. The time commitment on the part of the faculty member is not insignificant, although the time burden associated with grading is comparable to other methods of evaluating work that involves providing feedback on drafts of written materials throughout the semester and grading a major product at the end (e.g., research papers). To reduce the grading burden at the end of the course, each of us required components of the full product to be submitted at various stages during the semester so that the final product was largely a compilation of sections that had already received feedback. In the Javeriana and EAFIT courses, we placed students in groups to reduce the total number of cases submitted, and this had the added benefit of helping students advance their teamwork skills. In the course at Los Andes, students provided feedback to their peers so that not all of that responsibility fell on the instructor.

The other adjustment that faculty need to make is to surrender some time during class sessions that might ordinarily be devoted to substantive content and dedicate that time to the process of case research and case writing. The challenge for the faculty member is to use these opportunities as a way to illustrate course concepts and the application of theory.

Based on our experiences and student feedback, we offer three more detailed recommendations for faculty interested in trying this approach. First, students want to see examples that illustrate what the instructor's expectations are for their cases. Even if examples do not exist within the particular country or regional context, a carefully selected case from another setting can still help students appreciate the elements of a well-written case. If possible, an instructor should provide two or three examples to illustrate the variety of presentation styles possible and to avoid a formulaic approach to

case writing (a possible temptation if students only have a single illustrative example). Students do not generally see the instructor's guides or teaching notes that accompany cases, but if preparing such a document is part of the assignment, the instructor should provide examples of these as well.

Second, faculty should anticipate that students will need some assistance in locating and accessing appropriate source materials for a case. Part of the instructor's role as facilitator in the case-writing process is to help students determine where information may be stored and what approvals are necessary to access it. When written documents do not exist, students need to be prepared to gather information through other means, including observation, interviews, focus groups, and so on. Faculty must determine whether students will already have the necessary research skills from other courses in the program or if some time must be dedicated within the course for this purpose. Related to this, if students are interviewing public or other officials as part of their research processes, they need to be able to accurately inform those officials if the information will be used solely for a class project or if it might ultimately be more widely distributed.

Third, if the SWIF case pedagogy is selected intentionally in place of a traditional case method that uses cases written by others, the activity should be designed to advance particular goals. If a program or course seeks to emphasize collaboration, then the SWIF cases can be at a group level. In contrast, if the goal is to develop individual skills or to reflect on individual experiences, the cases can be written separately. In either instance, our experiences suggest that there is value to interaction with classmates in the process of case development and reflection. Similarly, the goals of the SWIF case approach relative to course learning objectives will dictate whether the course is designed around case writing as the main activity or if that process is a smaller component of the course.

We do not present SWIF cases as a replacement for the banks of cases that exist but rather as a

tool to augment those case banks and to encourage more of them to include a wider diversity of cases. The absence of teaching cases for the Colombian context was the motivating force behind our individual and collective decisions, and we are hopeful that this is a situation that will be remedied over time, either through the addition of Colombian cases to existing case banks (such as in Monterrey, Mexico, or those in the United States), and/or through the development of a case bank within Colombia. Either way, we recommend that all case banks—existing and future—examine ways to incorporate student-written cases and cases written in a variety of languages in their review processes, to make the best cases available to others. Practitioner-students working under the guidance of experienced faculty can bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to cases.

Addressing the lack of sufficient cases in Colombia or other Latin American countries is a collective responsibility and should not depend on a single individual or a small group of professors. At the level of programs, universities, countries, and regions, there is the opportunity to collaborate to improve the process of developing high-quality case studies. Graduate programs in public affairs have the potential to contribute greatly to this process, particularly when students have work experience to draw upon and the graduate program can provide the time, structure, and instructor guidance for students to gather information, apply and critically analyze theories, and utilize appropriate methodologies to develop strong cases. A common critique of the case method is the lack of generalizability. Although we utilized widely different approaches to the SWIF case process and we see benefits to this diversity, we also recognize the value of developing and applying a common structure and method across courses, programs, and even countries to increase the ability to compare and contrast across cases within a given case bank. In addition to contributing to the development of cases, graduate programs in public affairs at leading universities can be depositories for the kinds of information (documents, archives, interviews, current data, maps) needed to develop quality cases.

In sum, we suggest that there is a role for SWIF cases in the teaching of public affairs. For individual faculty interested in trying the SWIF case pedagogy, we offer our enthusiastic support and are happy to share syllabi, assignment instructions, grading rubrics, and advice beyond what is presented in this article. The case method in its traditional form using published cases has many benefits in the form of developing real-world competencies needed for effective management. However, our experiences suggest that SWIF cases offer many of the same benefits as well as some additional ones. For this reason, we advocate this method as both a short-term solution to the lack of cases in certain locations and as a long-term strategy for effective teaching of current and future public affairs professionals.

- 2 Beyond these historical factors contributing to a distinct Colombian context, an additional layer of unique circumstances surrounded our courses in 2014. Negotiations were occurring in Havana, Cuba, between representatives of the government of President Juan Manuel Santos and leaders of the FARC. In that context, public policy debates and public management decisions were shaped in large part by anticipation of a negotiated end to the armed conflict and the challenging transition to a postconflict state of peace. Cases developed during this period could not help but incorporate to some degree that aspect of Colombian life.
- 3 Though we taught our courses in Spanish, we have translated all examples of student comments into English.
- 4 Arguably, coping with limited information can be an advantage of the SWIF method, since it helps train students to work in situations where information is incomplete.

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NOTES

- 1 Our original search in May 2014 did not include the Rutgers University Cases and Simulations Portal for Public and Nonprofit Sectors, but a search in July 2015 of the nearly 1,000 cases in that database identified three cases set in Colombia.

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