Using the CAS Standards in the Fraternity and Sorority Advising Program Planning Processes

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For 20 years, I have worked in student affairs. I have been involved as a participant or consultant in at least 15 different strategic planning processes. I have never been part of a successful planning process that did not first involve a plan to conduct some level of assessment. It is clear to me planning is very strongly connected to assessment (Christakis & Bureau, 2015).

One tool a Fraternity and Sorority Advising Program (FSAP) can use for assessment is that of the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS). As a consortium of 43 associations, CAS offers standards outlining expectations for program success across a range of functional areas in higher education. Standards for a FSAP have been in place for over 30 years, and have been updated several times, most recently in 2010 (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015). The purpose of this article is to outline approaches for using the CAS FSAP Standards as an assessment tool to inform good strategic planning for a FSAP, including self-assessment and program review, environmental scanning, and reviewing the Standards to create infrastructure and strategic priorities.

CAS as Self-Assessment Leading into your Planning Process

Ultimately, CAS is a self-assessment process. However, to use CAS as self-assessment, the question of resources, most notably time, must be answered: true self-assessment means using the CAS Self-Assessment Guides, which ask questions and require evidence to document compliance with the FSAP Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015).

When conducting CAS FSAP self-assessment, a committee will determine the extent to which evidence in provided documents is sufficient to demonstrate alignment with the FSAP Standards. Good FSAP assessment efforts have embedded a number of ways to collect evidence of the program's outcomes. They may implement focus groups, interviews, general advising, document reviews, review of literature, surveys, and monitoring of benchmarks/key metrics (Strayhorn & Colvin, 2006): these data can inform CAS self-assessment efforts. An important question when examining the depth and breadth of your assessment is how resources will influence the process: how much time, money, and talent do you have to conduct an assessment process that informs good planning?

In good self-assessment, if evidence is not already available for review, then the FSAP must accept self-assessment findings will likely show the program is not compliant with the CAS Standards. It is vital for those conducting assessment as a means to strengthen strategic planning to see a lack of compliance as completely acceptable: the planning process will help you determine the extent to which priorities of CAS are indeed priorities of the FSAP on your campus. While CAS thinks they should be, these are aspirational standards provide a road map for excellence in a FSAP. If you are not here yet, strategic planning can be the tool to get you closer to alignment with these standards.

CAS as an Environmental Scan
Because CAS provides standards for 43 different functional areas, there is an opportunity to review the FSAP and the CAS General Standards to understand the trends and high priority issues in higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015). Each set of standards has 12 parts: mission, program, organization and leadership, human resources, ethics, legal and policy, equity, access and diversity, facilities, financial management, technology, and assessment and evaluation. Within these 12 parts are general standards, which are found across all 43 different sets of standards. While functional areas have distinctive attributes that necessitate standards only found in those programs, all areas have common/general standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015).

An environmental scan using CAS could be guided by a simple question: what are the issues identified within the CAS Standards that inform FSAP and all of higher education? A FSAP can review the CAS Standards to identify those vital issues within higher education and then determine how they need to be monitored, and in many cases attended to, by an effective FSAP.

CAS as a Guide to Departmental Infrastructure and Strategic Priorities
At their very basic, CAS Standards are recommendations for the infrastructure of functional areas in higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015). Going back to the list of components of the Standards, it's easy to see how CAS perceives a FSAP should be structured: guided by *mission*, the *program* should include specific components. The *organization and leadership* of the department should be structured in ways to achieve the goals of the functional area. The *human and financial resources* allocated should be in line with institutional perceptions of the value of the functional area. A set of *ethics* should guide work within the functional area, which should also be guided by the values of *equity, access and diversity,* and the *laws and policies* that inform all programs on a college campus. The functional area should have some level of access to *facilities* and *technology* in order to implement the strategic priorities of the functional area. Finally, *assessment and evaluation* is vital to ensure the functional area (i.e. FSAP) is achieving all it said it should within the previously mentioned areas of the Standards.

Those enacting strategic planning processes may use these Standards to develop a plan for the future: how can increased resources be found? What aspects of the program currently best support desired learning objectives of an effective FSAP? How can an FSAP better use technology? These are just some of the questions that can be considered if those involved in planning use the FSAP Standards as a guide for developing infrastructure and strategic priorities.

Conclusion
The CAS FSAP Standards have served our field well for over 30 years. These Standards can be a useful tool in assessing programs when preparing for a strategic planning process (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2015). Because CAS Standards represent higher education goals and objectives, they can also be used in an environmental scanning process to determine the

objectives of programs in higher education that a FSAP would want to replicate. Finally, CAS Standards outline the necessary infrastructure and priorities for a program to operate successfully. Using the CAS Standards as a method to determine strategic planning priorities can not only help the FSAP develop a great plan but also align the plan components with best practices for successful work within higher education

References

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