

CAS Update: Step Five of Program Review

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To help AFA members, we have embarked on a year-long series of articles to support better enactment of self-assessment and program review of their fraternity/sorority advising program (FSAP) using the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS). Past articles [can be found here](#) under the section of “Guides and Updates.”

This update emphasizes **the fifth stage of CAS program review, which focuses on developing the plan to act on your results**. As a reminder, this process consists of seven steps:

1. Plan the Process
2. Assemble and Educate the Team (note: this and step three go back and forth some, explained below)
3. Identify, Collect, and Review Evidence (primary purpose of self-assessment)
4. Conduct and Interpret Ratings Using Evaluate Evidence (launches FSAP into program review)
- 5. Develop an Action Plan**
6. Prepare a Report
7. Close the Loop

By this point, you have conducted internal department self-assessment, assembled and educated your team, compiled all the evidence to have all involved assess alignment with the CAS Standards, and taken the time with your internal team (and if applicable an additional external team) to rate and interpret alignment with CAS Standards based on the evidence reviewed.

Influencing this stage of the process is of course the feedback received from reviewers. One of the expectations is that an internal review team (IRT) chair must provide a report summarizing their observations that connects the evidence to some desired plan to increase, strengthen, or maintain alignment with the FSAP CAS Standards. If you use external reviewers, it should also be that they provide you with a report, in a predetermined timely manner, that outlines how they perceived alignment between perceptions of the FSAP, the IRT, and them as a committee. Feedback about the status of the FSAP (possibly infusing the Fraternity/Sorority Community, or the FSC, as well due to the interconnectedness of how students drive FSAP priorities) and ideas about what needs to get done can influence how a FSAP spends time developing their action plan.

The questions that drive action planning include: what trends or issues do we see that need our attention, can we get a sense from reviewers about priorities, and how do we go about doing more than just putting ideas on paper but to create a culture of ongoing attention to whatever plans we create?

Thinking about Issues/Trends

CAS standards for FSAP, and in general, reflect an ongoing effort to align functional areas in higher education with the expectations of our primary stakeholders. The General Standards, which cut across all 44 sets of standards, are revised every three years. Therefore, the best way that the FSAP Standards remain timely is through the same work that is done to make sure CAS Standards in general are timely and relevant in higher education. Revising specific functional area standards occurs every 8-10 years and we are working on expediting this some, but they require a lot of time and attention, so we try to launch about six to eight revision/development committees each year.

For the most part, the FSAP, last revised in 2010 and on the calendar to be revised beginning in 2019, still reflect the issues and trends specific to fraternity and sorority life. [The FSAP standards](#), which starts with a contextual statement (revised every three years as well), appear to still be relevant in that they provide direction on how departments should be operated that are somewhat timeless. While you think the issues/trends and how to tackle them will change a lot, they do not. We continue to attend to the same issues that are outlined in the FSAP. As the best way to deliver programs and services may change some and within diverse contexts, we try to apply (possibly innovative) ideas to address them, and enact intentional practices to manage the overall functions of a FSC.

It matters that you understand how CAS tries to maintain the relevance of its standards as well as how our timeline influences the content of those standards as you think of the issues/trends to which you must attend. This is vital when you develop a plan. We have done consulting on campuses for almost 20 years: it is not the broad priority areas that will likely change, but the tactics that must be in place to guide people to success in their implementation. Therefore, as you enact this fifth step, it is vital to have a sense of what those trends and issues are (and broad across the field) and how feedback from your self-assessment, IRT, and external reviewers can inform approaches to addressing.

Using Reviewer Feedback to Extract Plan Content

CAS reports tend to be very long and information from the IRT and external reviewers will be more than just the final report they provide. You will also have the raw scores from steps three

and four that you should review. There are a couple of approaches to how to use data at this level to develop a plan.

First, pick off the low hanging fruit: what can be done immediately, with little stakeholder input, and without expanding or exhausting resources? Identify these items and develop an operational plan for the first six months. It might be something such as website revisions or developing a needed dashboard to centralize data about the FSC, but these are things that will likely not require an act of Congress to begin implementing. Remember your goal is to become more aligned with the CAS Standards, so these items are geared toward the overall improvement of how the FSAP delivers its services and programs.

The other thing to consider is how data sources can be triangulated and synthesized. We wrote in a past issue about the problems that come when trying to identify consensus. When you being action planning, you think about where those points of consensus are across all of your sources. For example, if the external review team are the only ones who see something as poor or problematic, it may not be that it should be a focal point but rather in their experience they have seen other models that may do it better. Reaching out to them to ask about campuses to emulate may be a good way to figure out if their feedback should drive the development of planning for new priorities. Using these data sources, the raw data, the report they provided as well as using their expertise to identify good practices to apply, will help you to figure out priorities very differently than if you just reviewed only the score sheets or only the reports.

Having an (assessment and) planning culture

Higher education must have a culture in which evidence is used to guide the development of plans to reconcile disparities between what should happen in the delivery of programs and services and what does. Such a culture can be easily referred to as an assessment and planning ethos to guide efforts of improvement.

There are many resources in *AFA Perspectives, Essentials, and Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* that can help you strengthen the assessment culture you have. CAS supports assessment goals through identifying the structures, systems, and philosophies that should drive quality work in higher education programs and services. Assessment has become commonplace in higher education and student affairs, but the gap still persists in that we often fail to plan well and to close the loop, or wrap up the assessment and planning process in a way that provides structure for how we will move forward and act as a department.

As you do CAS program review, it is important to have a planning culture. Our perception of a planning culture is that participants understand the normal cycle of reviewing information to identify plans for both the short and long-term and this is done as part of the natural day to day operations of running a department. A planning culture can be guided by, but is not only the development of a document called a “strategic plan.” Having a plan and living by it to ensure ongoing attention to the trends/issues and evaluate how to address them are two different things that are often perceived as synonymous.

Most campuses in which CAS Standards for FSAP (or any functional area for the most part) have been best implemented use the self-assessment and program review process to launch strategic planning and strengthen the overall push toward ongoing attention to departmental/divisional/institutional mission, vision, goals and strategies. There are many great articles on strategic planning that can be found in old issues of Perspectives and Essentials. One that I think is very helpful is by [Benfield, Wagner, & Stephens in the May 2016 Essentials](#).

Conclusion

Step five in the implementation of CAS Program Review dictates that you are developing a plan to act on findings. This plan should be driven by identified trends and issues, pulling in common findings across all reviewers, and the extent to which you already have or think you can create a culture in which evidence is used to conduct planning that is constantly revisited. In the next issue of our CAS Association Updates we will talk more about strategic planning and step 6 in the process, which is the development of the report to summarize the evidence, plan, and overall process that has been used.