

Running head: CAS AND FALDOS

The Council for the Advancement of Standards and the Frameworks for Assessing Learning and

Development Outcomes: Resources for Assessment

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The rising cost of attending an institution of higher education and the perceived lack of appropriate skills possessed by individuals entering the workforce upon graduation are only two of many factors that have forced government officials and leaders of local communities to begin to question the quality of education in the nation's college and universities (Wingspread Group, 1993). As each institution begins to feel this scrutiny, all aspects of the campus community have been challenged to collect evidence documenting their overall effectiveness and efficiency as they relate to student success. The departments and functional areas that are typically assigned to a student affairs division are no exception. It has become clear that in the very near future student affairs professionals will be held more accountable to generate evidence of significant positive contributions to the overall development of students (ACPA, 1996).

Some student affairs practitioners agree that the profession is at a critical point to document and prove its impact on the developmental growth of today's college student (Boland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Schuh & Associates, 2001). However, some may not feel comfortable with their knowledge of assessment or feel adequately equipped to conduct it. Today, terminology like strategic planning, student learning, assessment strategies, and developmental outcomes (Miller, 2002) are new "buzz words" used in departmental meetings, but still too often with little understanding, training, or practice.

Perceptions about assessment by many student affairs practitioners have tended to be somewhat negative in nature. Professionals who have yet to develop an appreciation for assessment may be suspicious about why individuals are asking questions about the impact of their work (Conrad & Wilson, 2003). They may worry that assessment will lead to negative

outcomes such as the elimination of services or even of staff positions. Assessment practices by their nature often lead to change within an organization, and change can be perceived as a threatening situation for some staff members. Assessment can also be seen as very time consuming, expensive, and ineffective, not producing the results that the practitioners are seeking.

The task of assessment can become very overwhelming, especially when many practitioners do not know how and where to start. What is the purpose of the assessment plan? What should it look like? What needs to be measured? Who will be involved? What criteria will be used in the assessment process and how will the results be evaluated? Who will review the results? Who will implement any recommendations for change? What resources are available? These are but a few of the questions that arise when the concept of assessment is discussed.

As one way of responding to some of these questions, this article will review two resources that are now available. Each has been written specifically with the practitioner in mind, providing useful information about assessment and some helpful recommendations about how to begin the process.

#### The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS)

In 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) was established to develop professional standards and promote their use in institutions of higher education. The group of professional practitioners and academicians who came together to imagine this possibility and accomplish this task were faced with the challenge to create standards that "...represent every college and university educator and functional area specialist who believes in the learning and development of all students to be the essence of higher education." (CAS, 2006, p.3) In 1986, "*The Book of Professional Standards for Higher Education*" was published and initially

promoted to a wide variety of individuals working in higher education, including college and university presidents and chief student affairs officers.

The initial full CAS publication ... was based on the premise that student support practitioners needed access to a comprehensive and valid set of criteria to judge support program quality and effectiveness. Further, it was viewed as essential that those standards represent best practices that any college or university program can reasonably achieve. (CAS, 2006, p.3)

In creating the general standards, the core set of statements that form the basis for every set of functional area standards, CAS used guiding principles that were primarily focused on students and their institutions, diversity and multiculturalism, organization, leadership and human resources, health engendering environments, and ethical considerations (CAS, 2006). Keeping these principles in mind, CAS then developed and categorized standards of practice into components considered universal to all student affairs functional areas. This enabled practitioners within and outside their individual functional areas to collaborate with each other in their assessment efforts. The 13 components included mission; program; leadership; organization and management; human resources; financial resources; facilities, technology, and equipment; legal responsibilities; equity and access; campus and external relations; diversity; ethics; and assessment and evaluation (CAS). These components form the structure of nearly all sets of CAS standards; each set includes the general standards, common to all areas; the specialty standards, specific to the functional area; and guidelines, statements that add clarification or suggestions for enhanced practice.

Thus, the standards for the each functional area are presented to practitioners using a uniform format, prefaced by a contextual statement that provides background information and

the perspective from which each set of standards is written. The contextual statement is then followed by the standards and guidelines, arranged according to the thirteen parts described above. The standards (stated as “must” and printed in bold typeface in the standards book) are considered to be critical to the functional area and “...are basic statements that should be achievable by any program in any higher education institution when adequate and appropriate effort, energy, and resources are applied.”(CAS, 2006, p. 4) Additional information is provided in guidelines to which the functional area may aspire; guidelines are recommended as things a program or service “should” do to be recognized as an example of a program utilizing best practices.

For an example, in the standards for Housing and Residential Life Programs, CAS states:

**There *must* [italics added] be at least one professional staff member responsible for the administration and coordination of the department. This individual *must* [italics added] be knowledgeable about the goals and mission of the program.** (2006, p. 215)

CAS requires leaders or directors to be appropriately skilled and well-versed in the overall mission and goals of a housing program. Using this functional area standard as an example, there may be a variety of reasons (philosophical, financial) why some institutions have yet to assign professionally-trained, full-time staff to oversee each department; however, CAS makes it clear that the standard is that professional staff members are expected. Once again, standards are written with the understanding that all colleges and universities may achieve them with reasonable efforts. In this regard, CAS can also be used to offer guidance for practitioners who are working to consider future goals and strategic planning. CAS strongly encourages practitioners to adopt this practice and follows the stated standard with this guideline:

Individual residence halls and apartments areas *should* [italics added] be supervised by professional staff who have earned a master's degree from accredited institutions in a field of study such as college student personnel, college counseling, or higher education administration or as appropriate. (p.215)

In 2003, CAS published major revisions to the Program component (Part 2 of the thirteen component parts). Stronger emphasis was placed on the concepts of student development and student learning outcomes for measuring the overall quality of a program. Sixteen different student learning and developmental domains were revised and expanded from previous editions, and student learning outcomes were for the first time explicitly incorporated into each functional area. While the domains had existed previously as a list of examples of desirable outcomes, no support or background had been given to create a foundation for them. Some of the domains were grounded in student development theory and practice, while some others evolved from academic disciplines such as communications and social learning (Strayhorn, 2006). The identified domains included intellectual growth; effective communication; enhanced self-esteem; realistic self-appraisal; clarified values; career choices; leadership development; healthy behavior; meaningful interpersonal relationships; independence; collaboration; social responsibility; satisfying and productive lifestyles; appreciating diversity; spiritual awareness; and personal and educational goals. Practitioners were provided with illustrations and examples of relevant learning outcomes to assist them in identifying behaviors that reflect the students' achievement in each of the domains (CAS, 2006; Strayhorn, 2006). More information regarding the student learning and developmental outcome domains will be provided later in this article.

To date, CAS (2006) has published standards and guidelines for practice for 34 functional areas. These include the traditional areas typically found in student affairs: alcohol, tobacco, and

other drugs programs; campus activities; career services; clinical health services; college unions; commuter and off-campus living programs; counseling services; disability support services; education abroad; financial aid; fraternity and sorority advising; health promotion; housing and residential life; international student programs; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender programs; multicultural student programs; orientation; outcomes assessment and program evaluation; recreational sports; student conduct; student leadership programs; and women student programs.

In addition, there are standards and guidelines provided for functional areas that may be more traditionally housed in other units on campus. These include academic advising; admissions; campus information and visitor services; campus religious and spiritual programs; college honor societies; conference and events programs; distance education; education abroad; internship programs; learning assistance programs; registrars; and TRIO and other educational opportunity programs, as well as master's level student affairs administration preparation programs.

The recent edition of CAS (2006) included two new important documents related to the work of student affairs practitioners: *CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence for Professional Practice in Higher Education* and the *CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles*. While CAS has been primarily focused on promoting standards to assure quality of the programs and services of functional areas, the *Characteristics of Individual Excellence* (CAS, 2006, p.17-19) has been targeted at describing characteristics representative of excellent practice for the individual practitioner. This document not only outlines the necessary skills and competencies for professionals but provides “markers of professionalism” (p.17) which are grouped into three different categories: general knowledge and skills, interactive competencies, and self mastery.

The identified list of characteristics “assumes a philosophy and practice of life-long learning and professional development shared by individual practitioners and their institutions” (p. 18).

The *CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles* (2006, p. 20-21) was developed from a set of common principles found throughout the missions, stated purposes, and ethical codes of professional associations that are affiliated with CAS. The shared ethical principles were not established to override or supersede the existing individual associations’ ethical codes, but to provide a common set of philosophies from which issues could be framed and discussed. The document identifies seven overarching ethical principles: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, veracity, and affiliation.

Designed primarily as a self-study tool, CAS provides an excellent way to initiate an assessment plan to evaluate a department’s overall programs, procedures, and services. Since there is no external review process to determine the functional area’s compliance with the standards, practitioners may find its use to be less threatening as an assessment tool and more readily support its implementation. Information resulting from the review process should be seen as helpful and a method for the department to improve its practices and procedures. Practitioners will find a clear, easy to follow, step by step process to conduct a self-study outlined in the *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (CAS, 2006). To further assist those responsible for conducting the process, a Self-Assessment Guide (SAG) has been developed for each functional area. The SAGs translate the minimum standards and guidelines into a more usable evaluation format, with criteria statements and a rating scale so that staff within the functional area, or a program review team, can measure the work of the area against the information provided by CAS.

Overall, CAS is meant to be a “living” resource – one that is reflective of the current issues and practices of the profession (CAS, 2006). Regular reviews of the standards and guidelines are conducted according to prescribed protocol, and new functional area standards are added regularly. Any change to the standards must be mutually agreed upon by all the associations represented on CAS (currently 36 professional associations), thus ensuring that the CAS standards represent consensus about standards from across higher education, rather than reflecting only the perspective of a single professional association.

#### The Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes

As practitioners began to work with student learning and development outcomes, they needed mechanisms to better define and measure them. CAS (2006) responded and published *The Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes* (FALDOS) as ...“a direct result from the CAS Standards mandate that each functional area ‘provide evidence of its impact on the achievement of student learning and development outcomes.’” (Strayhorn, 2006, p.1) This publication now provides practitioners with a useful, easy to follow resource outlining methods to begin measuring students’ learning and development as it relates directly to each of the sixteen student learning and development outcome domains identified by CAS. How are students being affected? What is the overall impact that the programs and services have on students? How do we know what they have learned?

The FALDOS (CAS, 2006) begin with a short synopsis of CAS history and mission for those practitioners who may not have any prior knowledge of the resource. The evolution of the FALDOS is described and their relationship to the CAS standards and guidelines provided. In chapter 1, the sixteen student learning and developmental domains that were mentioned earlier in this document have been outlined in much greater detail, and an explanation of the rationale and

intent for each FALDO is provided. Chapter 2 includes a short introduction of assessment and recommendations to consider when conducting an assessment process. A summary of technical issues involved in assessment has also been included for the practitioner's review. These include reliability and trustworthiness of the instrument used for assessment and its consistency of use over time; the validity and accuracy of data obtained; the identification of the necessary sample size to yield significance; and general information on research design.

Similar to CAS standards, each of the 16 FALDOs is presented in a uniform format beginning with the theoretical background that supports the domain. Examples of relevant variables and associated student behavior indicators are included and are followed by two examples of assessment (one quantitative and one qualitative) to measure student growth and development in that particular domain. Practitioners are then directed to specific assessment instruments that are readily available and given an explanation of their potential uses. To conclude each FALDO, practitioners are provided with a number of suggested readings for further review to develop a more effective assessment plan. Links to websites are also included; a CD of the book accompanies each copy, so that readers have hyperlinks to the internet resources provided.

Practitioners are encouraged to think about utilizing several FALDOs in their assessment plan (Strayhorn, 2006).

“Although it is unrealistic to expect all functional areas to assess student outcomes in each and every learning and development domain, there is ample reason to believe that multiple domains are influenced by virtually all functional area programs and services.”

(p.151)

They are also encouraged to conduct their assessment using a wide variety of methods so that a more complete picture and comparative data can be obtained. Practitioners may find it useful to read the introduction and epilogue sections of the book prior to exploring the individual domains. The epilogue provides a helpful summary of the uses of the FALDOS and some additional comments that help “frame” the materials for review.

#### Practical Uses of CAS Standards and FALDOS

Practitioners will find many practical uses for both CAS standards and the FALDOS. They may be used independently; however, using both resources in an assessment plan would be extremely helpful. Practitioners may find CAS and the FALDOS helpful when designing and developing new programs and services. The CAS standards can provide the necessary documentation for practitioners to justify delivery of new services and the hiring of appropriate personnel to oversee them. They can use the FALDOS to more clearly identify learning outcomes and design methods to measure them. Practitioners may also find these resources to be helpful when preparing for an external review. The minimum standards and measurement of learning outcomes allow the individuals to who are conducting the review to evaluate the delivery of services of an existing functional area with that of the standards outlined by CAS.

Independently, a supervisor may utilize CAS to learn more about a functional area with which he or she has not had any prior experience. In addition, the standards and guidelines are an excellent staff development tool for all members of the unit. The specificity of each standard can be used in the orientation of new staff members so that they will have a better understanding of the functional area’s array of services and expectations. In professional preparation programs, CAS may be used as a tool through which graduate students learn more about assessment and

conduct mini self-assessments of their assigned functional areas. In addition, many practitioners have found the CAS materials to be helpful in preparing for anticipated accreditation reviews.

The FALDOS can help practitioners identify specific student learning outcomes that will provide tangible evidence for measuring the impact of programs and services. The examples provided for each domain are well defined. Utilizing this information, the FALDOS may be used as a primer for teaching staff how to identify and write learning outcomes and how to use appropriate measurement tools to assess them.

As mentioned earlier, there is an increased emphasis for professionals in student affairs to assess their programs and services effectively and also to document their impact on college students. Understanding the process of designing and conducting assessments is rapidly becoming a required skill for professionals at all levels in the organization. CAS and the FALDOS are excellent resources and are written in a manner that can be easily understood by all staff members. When utilized as intended, each of these resources offers a sound starting point for a department to set the direction in creating an overall long-term assessment plan. Practitioners are encouraged to consider these tools as resources when developing an assessment plan.

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