



# Promoting Quality in Higher Education

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS)  
Celebrates 25 Years

BY JAN ARMINIO AND DON CREAMER

**T**his year, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) celebrates its 25th anniversary. This is a remarkable feat considering that CAS had no governmental or institutional authority behind its establishment—only the good will of concerned practitioners. There were no calls from activists to create an organization to address widespread quality concerns and there were no funds to support its operation. Instead, CAS was established because the creation of standards in student affairs was a natural progression as the burgeoning field matured into a full-fledged profession (Miller, 1984; Paterson and Carpenter, 1989).

Paterson and Carpenter (1989) stated that CAS standards signified “a major step forward in the efforts toward becoming a profession.” Those standards also represented the will of committed and caring student affairs professionals resolved to set their own standards versus having standards set by others who were not informed about the profession’s purpose, values, and goals. Through CAS, “student affairs clearly announced its determination to control its own destiny” (Byron and Mullendore, 1991). Thus, CAS was created and incorporated as a non-profit educational agency.

The establishment of standards in student affairs was incredibly timely. The assessment and accreditation processes and other means of ensuring and proving quality in higher education became increasingly necessary as government agencies and the public sought to hold institutions more accountable for student learning (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).

The visionary creators of CAS proposed a consortium of professional associations, with each association appointing two representatives to serve on the CAS board of directors. All participating representatives collaborate in promoting the CAS standards and guidelines, all of which are approved by the board of directors and receive unanimous affirmation. The credibility of these standards is based on a consensus of more than 30 professional associations agreeing in full to any published standard or guideline bearing the CAS name. Originally named the Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs, CAS changed its name in 1992 to Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education to acknowledge involvement by associations and functional areas outside student affairs, such as the American College Health Association, the College Information and Visitor Services Association, and the College Reading and Learning Association. Ultimately, the concept of CAS was to promote quality practices in higher education through agreed upon standards and guidelines that, if implemented, would characterize programmatic excellence in the respective functional areas of educational service.

Over the last quarter century, CAS has achieved many of its goals and is constantly creating new objectives to better serve its constituents. The CAS standards are “evolving documents” (Byron and Mullendore, 1991). The first book of standards was published in 1986, with updated standards published in 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003. Each new book of standards offers revised as well as new standards for emerging functional areas that include student leadership programs, visitor services, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender programs and services, among others.

CAS also publishes self-assessment guides (SAGs), which provide a format for noting what degree programs or services comply or fail to comply with CAS standards.

### **How CAS Influences Quality**

An essential question about the work of CAS deserves further exploration. Is there a clear link between the adoption and implementation of standards and guidelines for practice and quality in higher education?

The soundness of the CAS mission—to promote self-determining standards and guidelines to assist practitioners in

establishing and conducting programs of high quality educational service in higher education—has withstood critical assessment by thousands of educational practitioners over the last 25 years. Such assessments stand as testaments to the reliability of the most fundamental assumption underlying CAS: quality educational practice can be achieved through self-assessment and self-regulation.

*“Defining quality is the first hurdle to establish a convincing link between standards (input) and quality (output).”*

Defining quality is the first hurdle to establish a convincing link between standards (input) and quality (output). The task is made more difficult by the fact that an accepted definition may vary from institution to institution, from program to program, and from person to person. Within those variations, certain themes emerge regarding quality. Quality is achieving one’s goals; quality is meeting or exceeding the expectations of stakeholders; quality is creating an outcome consistent with institutional goals (such as student development); quality is adding value; and quality is the result of maintaining educational programs and services that adhere to minimum standards and guidelines as proscribed by practitioners in the field.

What happens when practitioners adopt and implement CAS standards and guidelines in their programs and services? First, the CAS process requires that practitioners reach consensus about the characteristics and expectations of their programs. The simple act of agreeing on a purpose increases the likelihood of achieving that purpose.

Second, the CAS process offers practitioners a built-in plan for assessing outcomes of their programs by CAS standards and guidelines. The CAS general standards even provide multiple criteria for assessing outcomes in many developmental domains.

Third, practitioners who use CAS standards have guidelines by which to judge the performance of individual practitioners. At a minimum, practitioners can be held responsible for actions to carry out prescribed programmatic functions as specified by CAS.

Fourth, practitioners who use CAS standards and guidelines have a mechanism to facilitate communication with other providers of educational programs and services. If many programs are using CAS standards and guidelines, they have a common language to express their results.

*“CAS standards also provide  
criteria by which programs  
of professional preparation  
can be judged.”*

Quality educational programs and services are linked to similar intentions and collaboration among providers. CAS standards require institutions to focus on essential purposes such as student development; hiring and nurturing the right professionals to carry out the work of the program or service; assessment, evaluation, and reform of programmatic activities; and communicating achievements in concert with other providers of educational programs and services. On each of these criteria, CAS can be clearly linked to quality education practice.

### **How CAS Standards Are Used**

CAS standards can be used in a number of ways to influence quality through: program, staff, and student development; continuous improvement; self-study for accreditation or review; program planning and evaluation; acceptance of and education about student affairs services and programs; political maneuverability; budgetary assistance; a framework for ethical practice; and standardized language in functional areas. CAS standards also provide criteria by which programs of professional preparation can be judged.

According to recent research, a greater number of respondents used CAS materials to guide their programs rather than for self assessment. However, SAGs are more likely to be used for that purpose rather than read or used as a guide for programs. Of the functional area SAGs, educators have purchased the housing and residence life guide most frequently.

A recent study indicated that only 24 percent of the members of professional associations who belong to the CAS consortium measure learning outcomes (Arminio and Gochenhauer, in press). Now that student affairs is in the midst of using assessment to prove accountability, senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) are encouraged to make

assessment skills a higher priority in hiring and staff development. Research indicates that new professionals are learning about CAS in graduate programs, but do not become directly involved in assessment. For example, a recent study of SSAOs found that conducting research was not valued as a professional development activity (Winston, Torres, Carpenter, McIntire, and Petersen, 2001). In fact, assessment was not even mentioned as a professional development activity.

Qualitative data and anecdotal feedback indicate that CAS standards are often used in periodic program reviews and in conjunction with self studies for accreditation reviews. Many institutions have designed particular program review formats in which CAS standards are intertwined. For example, the student affairs division at State University of New York (SUNY), Genesco, promotes a generic learning model (Askew and Grayson, 2002). The first step in this model is for assessors to consider resources dedicated to or consumed by the program and what the program needs to be effective. This first step could include CAS standards as well as division goals. The model then asks reviewers to consider what the program does to fulfill its goals. Reviewers measure what is accomplished, with or for whom, compared to program intentions. Specifically, a staff member who directs a leadership education program may select the division goal of “enhance learning” and the CAS learning outcome of “applies previously understood information and concepts to a new situation or setting” as one single measure for the review. Using student journals required as part of the leadership education program, the staff member could assess student perceptions about whether and how they applied new information to their leadership experiences. The staff member could also use standardized instruments such as the Reflective Judgment Interview (King and Kitchener, 1994) or the Change Agent Questionnaire (Hall and Williams, 1995) to assess learning outcomes of students involved in the leadership education program. This approach complies with and provides evidence of the CAS standard “identifies relevant and desirable student learning and development outcomes and provides programs and services that encourage the achievement of those outcomes.”

Relevant and desirable outcomes include intellectual growth, leadership development, and achievement of personal and educational goals, among others. These outcomes meet the standard that programs must “regularly conduct systematic qualitative and quantitative evaluations of program quality to determine whether and to what degree the stated mission and goals are being met.” While some institutions have used CAS standards for individual unit reviews, other institutions have used CAS standards in all functional areas. At Longwood University in Virginia, all student affairs administrative units are required to focus on student learning and personal development and to use CAS standards to guide their activities. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) cited Longwood University as a prime example of student engagement in their own learning.

## The Impact of CAS

Research has shown that since the inception of CAS in the late 1970s, the organization has become increasingly influential. In its earlier years, there was little utilization of CAS standards and their long-term effects were unknown. More recent research indicates a connection between CAS standards and learning outcomes. CAS standards operationalize important values of the profession. Cooper and Saunders (2000) found that SSAOs, the student affairs professionals most likely to have heard of CAS, believed that all of the CAS standards hold some importance.

## Increasing Awareness of CAS Standards

In the collaborative task of revising CAS standards, several criticisms have been noted. Among those criticisms are that the standards are too prescriptive, have been based on inputs rather than on outcomes, and are not available for free (Barrett, personal communication; Love, 2000). The graduate preparation program standards have been criticized for not allowing institutional programs to create unique niches (Love, 2000). CAS standards are still used more widely in public four-year institutions than in private institutions or community colleges.

CAS, in cooperation with SSAOs, should strive to increase the awareness of its standards and the potential role of standards in enhancing the quality of programs in liberal arts

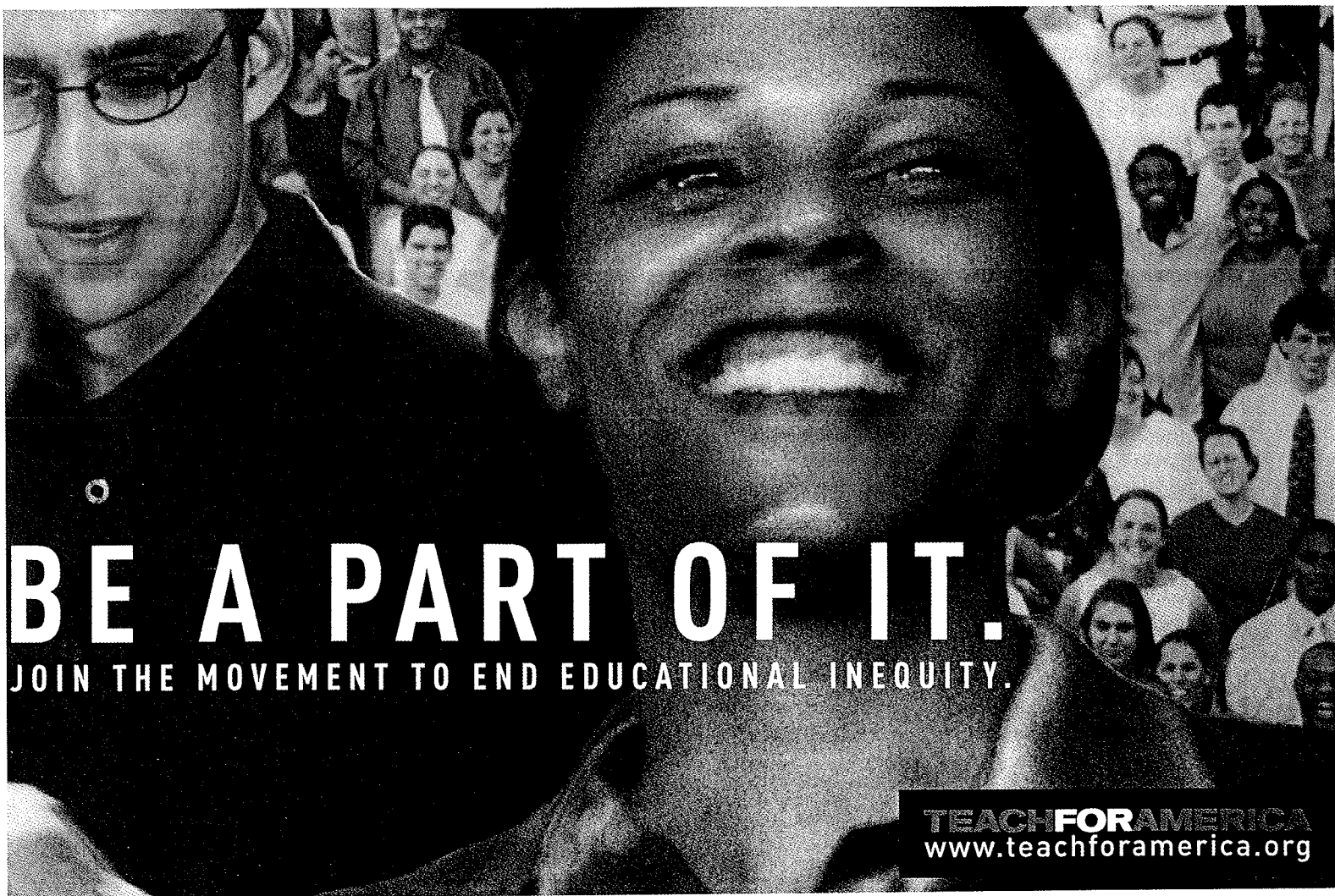
institutions and community colleges. In conjunction with CAS leadership, SSAOs should continue to advocate for measuring learning and making decisions based on data and standards to ensure quality educational practices.

For more information on CAS and CAS materials, and a complete list of references cited in this article, visit the CAS website at <http://www.cas.edu>.

---

*Jan Arminio is an associate professor in the department of counseling at Shippensburg University and is team leader for the college student personnel graduate program. She is president-elect of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and has represented the National Association for Campus Activities to CAS since 1987. She also chairs the NASPA faculty fellows.*

*Don G. Creamer is a professor of higher education and student affairs in the department of educational leadership and policy studies at Virginia Tech University, where he coordinates the graduate preparation programs. He also co-directs the Educational Policy Institute of Virginia Tech, is president of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), and is a member of the board of trustees of the Educational Leadership Foundation of the American College Personnel Association.*



**BE A PART OF IT.**  
JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO END EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY.

**TEACH FOR AMERICA**  
[www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org)