The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has created standards that can be used to increase structural soundness and ethical excellence in institutional programs and services.

Promoting Integrity through Standards of Practice

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For over 30 years, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has developed and promulgated standards of practice for quality programs and services. The standards are designed intentionally to promote student learning and developmental outcomes through a self-assessment process. CAS has coalesced professional expectations from 40 member associations, emphasizing the integrity of campus programs through comprehensive structural soundness and ethical excellence.

It is indeed appropriate that a chapter on standards of practice be included in a book describing professional integrity. There are two related uses of the word integrity. One refers to a commitment to values, standards, and ethical principles. The other use refers to “a condition of being undivided,” referring to being complete or whole (Merriam-Webster.com, 2011). These two definitions connect in this chapter in that integrity demands that student affairs professionals commit to and are united with standards of practice and ethics of the profession. The CAS standards are the standards with which student affairs professionals are expected to unite.

An example may assist in appreciating the role CAS can play in creating a student affairs environment of integrity. This example will be developed over the course of this chapter. Chris has advocated for the creation of an LGBT Center and approval has been granted at this midsized institution to establish such a center. In trying to ensure that a quality center is conceived, Chris turns to CAS and its resources for guidance. We shall make references to Chris and this new opportunity as we describe how CAS assists in ensuring integrity.
We start with a review of the role of standards in professional practice, addressing how the CAS approach is foundational to the integrity of quality professional practice. Then, our discussion moves to the various CAS resources that ground student affairs practice in integrity. Specifically, these include the CAS General Standards, the CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles, and CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence for Professional Practice in Higher Education. Our chapter ends by exploring challenges CAS faces to ensure quality programs in student affairs.

Role of Standards in Professional Practice

In the example introduced earlier, Chris seeks to use standards to become informed about critical components of a quality LGBT Center, a new program at the institution, and his new responsibilities. Professional standards provide an instrument to aid in the design of quality programs and services. Standards also provide an exemplar that professionals can use to judge the quality of their work.

More specifically, standards serve to explicate expectations to new professionals and guide professionals in creating new programs, improving existing programs, and accepting new responsibilities. By facilitating comparisons, these uses of standards promote professional self-regulation. Meeting standards helps assure service users (e.g., students, their families, faculty) of the integrity and soundness of the professional practices with whom they are engaging.

Self-Regulation. Establishing standards has become critical to the public trust of professions. In the extreme, government regulatory agencies use standards from a field (e.g., medicine) to regulate that field, accredit preparation programs, and license or credential practitioners such as doctors or nurses. This protects the public when securing medical services or practices. Even when professions do not accredit programs or individuals are not licensed, self-regulation is critical for public trust. Standards can prevent or moderate outside intervention in professional concerns.

Standards related to higher education are relatively new. They differ from professional standards in lower educational levels in several ways. First, standards in higher education have mainly served to improve educational practices rather than to influence degree attainment. Second, there has been less public scrutiny because higher education attendance is not mandatory. Historically, “there were relatively few colleges and universities, only a small portion of the population attended, and the curriculum was not of concern to many” (Alstete, 2004, p. 7). Finally, it has only been recently that the public trust in higher education has been questioned (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) whereas the K–12 sector has been scrutinized for decades. Because of the question of public trust, some states and institutions have tied funding requests to performance standards.
History of Standards in Student Affairs

Standards and accreditation began at the end of the 19th century and were seen as a response to inconsistency and confusion regarding college admission. “Because the federal government lacked the authority to deal with the unresolved educational issues that were beyond the scope of state officials” college officials began to solve the problem of inconsistencies themselves (Alstete, 2004, p. 7). Therefore, regional school accrediting associations began to set minimal standards for the accreditation of higher education institutions (Alstete, 2004). Subsequently, Andrew Carnegie established the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which required institutions to comply with national “minimal standards” regarding faculty, courses, and admission requirements in order to be funded (Alstete, 2004, p. 9). These beginnings enabled students to transfer from one institution to another, adding consistency and credibility to that process. And from these beginnings accreditation came to be defined as a systematized process for an established formalized authoritative body to recognize institutions that have met a prescribed level of performance (Mable, 1991).

After admission standards were formalized for postsecondary institutions, specialized discipline standards such as counseling and college health were established and promulgated along with generalized institutional standards (Alstete, 2004). However, the accreditation system has been criticized for most of its history. Some educators have disliked the notion of outsiders dictating institutional policies, ridiculed the cost in terms of time and money, lamented the competition it encourages, disparaged a loss of innovation and creativity, and described the accreditation process as self-serving (Alstete, 2004). Accreditation was criticized as well for being “elusive, nebulous, superficial, and meaning different things to different people” (p. 17). Most recently, the Center for College Affordability and Productivity called for the complete overhaul of the current accreditation process (Kelderman, 2010).

Student affairs emphasized self-assessment instead of accreditation through the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) that was created in 1979. In recent years, assessment in higher education has expanded beyond its original purposes to include assessment for comparability (i.e., benchmarking against other institutions), assessment for accountability (i.e., holding offices responsible for some level of outcome), and assessment for improvement (i.e., providing data to make evidence-based decisions to make programs more effective). The CAS approach advocates for self-assessment for the purpose of improvement.

CAS, a consortium of professional associations in higher education, published its first set of standards in 1986. The standards covered a broad span of educational programs and services such as academic advising; campus activities; career services; disability support services; health promotion services; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender programs; and others.
From the start, the credibility of CAS standards was based on inter-association consensus about the essential qualities of student development programs and services, as well as for graduate school education of professionals entering student affairs (CAS, 1980). Subsequent compilations of standards were published in 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2006, and 2009.

The CAS standards reflect the evolution of student affairs administration as a professional field. Establishing standards is necessary in any profession, so the creation of standards was a natural progression in student affairs (Paterson & Carpenter, 1989). Indeed, Paterson and Carpenter (1989) stated that CAS standards represented “a major step forward in the efforts toward becoming a profession” (p. 125). Furthermore, in recent years, government agencies and the public have sought to hold institutions more accountable for student learning, and assessment has become pertinent to accreditation (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). CAS standards represent the student affairs profession’s commitment to set its own standards and inform others outside the profession about its purpose, values, and goals. By establishing standards, “Student affairs clearly announced its determination to control its own destiny” (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991, p. 29) and assure the integrity of the field. CAS standards are “evolving documents” (p. 29) in that they are revised every five to seven years, and new standards are being written continuously. In 2010, CAS made new or newly revised standards available on its web site in between the publication the CAS book of standards.

**Uses of CAS Standards**

Standards can be used for program development, continuous improvement, self-study for accreditation or internal review, staff development, student development, program planning, program evaluation, acceptance of and education about student affairs services and programs, identification of student learning and developmental outcomes, political maneuverability, budgetary assistance, ethical practice, and to standardize language in functional areas (Arminio & Gochenauer, 2004; Bryan & Mullendore, 1991). Plus, they provide “criteria by which programs of professional preparation can be judged” (Miller, 1991, p. 48). Following are ways these standards address integrity in student affairs practice.

**Specific Ways CAS Standards Address Integrity**

*Elements of Standards.* A comprehensive program design is promoted in each standard that assures the structural soundness, wholeness, and integrity. Each CAS standard is comprised of 14 categories of general standards that are consistent across each of the 40 functional area standards. The categories of general standards are (1) mission, (2) program, (3) leadership, (4) human resources, (5) ethics, (6) legal responsibilities, (7) equity and access, (8) diversity, (9) organization and management, (10) campus and external relations, (11) financial resources, (12) technology, (13) facilities and equipment, and (14) assessment and evaluation. Since
these general standards are consistent in each functional area, entire divisions of student affairs can be consistent in their approaches.

The word *standard* was first used in western Germany in the 12th century to describe a “flag or conspicuous object as a rallying point” (Harper, 2010). Literally, standard meant to stand hard or firm. As a result, CAS standards are written as “must” or “shall” statements. Programs and services are required to meet these “must” or “shall” statements unless a review team can verify that the standard is met by another functional area within the institution. “Shall” or “can” statements, called *guidelines*, are descriptors of ways to enhance program quality beyond the essential components. Programs may select those guideline elements they wish to assess based on their program and institution.

In returning to our example, the reader can see how Chris would utilize standards and guidelines as information inputs to guide the creation of the LGBT program and service. From writing the LGBT Center mission to aligning the mission with essential aspects of the program, collaborating with campus and community agencies, and assessing program outcomes, the CAS standards advance the wholeness and consistency of the LGBT program integrity.

* A Focus on Ethics. Integrity has an ethical dimension and the CAS process explicitly expects and promotes ethical professional behavior. The CAS Preamble asserts “beliefs about ethics require that all programs and services be carried out in an environment of integrity and high ideals” (CAS, 2009, p. 18). Ethical practices are so critical that one of the 14 general standards is devoted to that expectation. See Exhibit 3.1 for specifics of the CAS Ethics general standard.

In its attempt to advance professional integrity, CAS thematized the ethical statements of member associations and identified some common denominators. “From these codes, CAS has created a statement of shared ethical principles that focuses on seven basic principles that form the foundation for CAS member association codes: autonomy, non-malfeasance, beneficence, justice, fidelity, veracity, and affiliation” (CAS Book of Standards, 2009, pp. 23–24; see also www.CAS.edu). Program realities may not be what program ideals are so professional associations need to regularly revisit their professional codes of conduct to be responsive to issues such as cultural relevancy.

Chris will want to contemplate the ways that the CAS standards can be enacted through ethical means. How can this new program meet the standard of “educating the campus community when decisions or policies may affect the achievement of LGBT students” (CAS, 2009, p. 297) with veracity, beneficence, justice, and autonomy?

* Individual Excellence. CAS responded to concerns of the lack of consistent and quality supervision in student affairs (Winston & Creamer, 1997) by creating Characteristics of Individual Excellence for Professional Practice in Higher Education. These “ideal performance characteristics that describe professional practice” (CAS, 2009, p. 21) assume that integrity is
Exhibit 3.1. CAS General Standard: Ethics

Persons involved in the delivery of Programs and Services must adhere to the highest principles of ethical behavior. Programs and services must review relevant professional ethical standards and develop or adopt and implement appropriate statements of ethical practice. Programs and services must publish these statements and ensure their periodic review by relevant constituencies.

Programs and services must orient new staff members to relevant ethical standards and statements of ethical practice.

Staff members must ensure that privacy and confidentiality are maintained with respect to all communications and records to the extent that such records are protected under the law and appropriate statements of ethical practice. Information contained in students’ education records must not be disclosed except as allowed by relevant laws and institutional policies. Staff members must disclose to appropriate authorities information judged to be of an emergency nature, especially when the safety of the individual or others is involved, or when otherwise required by institutional policy or relevant law.

Staff members must be aware of and comply with the provisions contained in the institution’s policies pertaining to human subjects research and student rights and responsibilities, as well as those in other relevant institutional policies addressing ethical practices and confidentiality of research data concerning individuals.

Staff members must recognize and avoid personal conflicts of interest or appearance thereof in the performance of their work.

Staff members must strive to insure the fair, objective, and impartial treatment of all persons with whom they interact.

When handling institutional funds, staff members must ensure that such funds are managed in accordance with established and responsible accounting procedures and the fiscal policies or processes of the institution.

Promotional and descriptive information must be accurate and free of deception.

Staff members must perform their duties within the limits of their training, expertise, and competence. When these limits are exceeded, individuals in need of further assistance must be referred to persons possessing appropriate qualifications.

Staff members must use suitable means to confront and otherwise hold accountable other staff members who exhibit unethical behavior.

Staff members must be knowledgeable about and practice ethical behavior in the use of technology.

lifelong endeavor shared by the individual as well as the institution at which the professional is employed. To illustrate, self-mastery characteristics include a commitment to excellence of all work, utilizing self-reflection to improve practice, viewing professionalism as an important aspect of personal identity, maintaining position-appropriate appearance, managing one’s personal life so that overall professional effectiveness is maintained, assuming accountability for mistakes, and reevaluating continued employment when personal, professional, and institutional goals are incompatible and inhibit the purist of excellence.

Chris might decide to use these characteristics for self-development and self-evaluation purposes, by reflecting on evidence of how these characteristics are met. Where are there gaps? Chris can also contemplate how to embed these characteristics in a performance evaluation process.

**CAS Challenges**

Intentional professional practice guides the process through which standards are established and inform how standards are modified. However, CAS must balance the demand for high quality with the realities of practice. Criticisms have been voiced that the standards are too prescriptive, are based on inputs rather than on outcomes, and are not available for free (W. Barrett, personal communication, June 5, 2002; Love, 2000). The graduate preparation program standards have been criticized for not allowing institutional programs to express their unique nature (Love, 2000). In responding to feedback such as this, CAS has upheld integrity through transparency, dialogue, and working continually to improve standards to guide practice.

How standards influence effective practice is another challenge. Creamer (2003) called for a study of the effects of CAS standards and guidelines on student learning and development. Among other questions, he asked, “Are educational programs and services that are guided by CAS standards and guidelines more effective than similar programs and services that are not guided by CAS standards and guidelines?” (p. 119). There are efforts currently to confirm this connection.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is the promulgation of standards. The standards have not been fully integrated into preparation and practice. Although most student affairs graduate programs teach about the standards and many professional associations have regular CAS convention programs, many higher education graduate programs do not teach about CAS. In addition, few professionals know about CAS if they come to student affairs from other disciplines. CAS has created a new strategic outreach agenda to address these challenges.

**Conclusion**

CAS provides professional guidance to develop quality programs and practices that result in intentional student learning outcomes. Comprehensive
standards and the self-assessment process assure the sustainability and integrity of professionally intentional program design. Student affairs administrators can depend on CAS for timely and thoughtful guidance bringing structural soundness and ethical excellence to professional practice.

References


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