CAS as a Framework for Crisis Management
Emily Perlow | Worcester Polytechnic Institute|@eperlow
Daniel Bureau | University of Memphis|@danbureau

About CAS and Fraternity and Sorority Advising Standards

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) exists to encourage the use of professional standards to inform the structure, delivery, and self-assessment of 45 diverse functional areas in higher education. Existing since 1979, CAS is a consortium of professional associations in higher education, most from the area of student affairs, but including fields also found in academic affairs (i.e. enrollment management functions).

Standards are developed by CAS Council-appointed committees and expert reviewers who have experience in the functional area. The Standards consist of 12 parts, including a focus on such areas as human resources, financial resources, and assessment and evaluation. AFA has been a member of CAS since 1981, and our Fraternity and Sorority Advising Program (FSAP) standards have been in place since 1986. They have been revised four times, last in 2010 (set for review beginning in fall 2018), and can be accessed on the AFA website.

The Decision to Use CAS as a Framework for Addressing Crisis

In the years leading up to 2005, the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) fraternity/sorority community had experienced declining membership numbers, two fraternity house fires, the closing of two chapters for the first time in many years, a strained relationship with city housing authorities, lower housing occupancies, and several conduct issues. The WPI Trustees and university leadership, many of whom were staunch supporters of the fraternity/sorority experience on campus, were asking whether fraternity/sorority life continued to add value to the WPI experience. The community truly was in crisis.

As a young professional, fresh from finishing her Master's Degree and the sole fraternity/sorority professional on the campus, Emily was challenged in the first few months of her role to figure out what was happening with fraternity/sorority life and to develop a plan to change the trajectory. The Trustees called for a comprehensive review to examine the strengths of the fraternity/sorority community and areas in which WPI could strengthen. The result was a collaborative plan involving a Greek Life Task Force composed of faculty, staff, students, and alumni to identify best practices for high performing organizations and to provide a framework for implementation. The work of the Greek Life Task Force helped to support WPI fraternal organizations in forming and maintaining a strong, principle-driven fraternal community.

ASSOCIATION OF
FRATERNITY | SORORITY ADVISORS

First, the committee was asked to envision what a successful community might look like: What actions, beliefs, and truths did WPI want the community to demonstrate? The CAS learning and development outcomes served as part of that framework. The Task Force and its subcommittees looked for evidence where those learning and development outcomes were and were not being achieved. The committee then made recommendations for what they believed high performing chapters, councils, Greek Alumni Council, and the fraternity/sorority programs office should be doing to support those outcomes. These recommendations helped form the basis for a 5-year action plan to move the department, chapters, councils, and alumni organizations to align more closely with best practices that supported the community's health.

While the CAS standards are designed only to be applied to the work of the fraternity/sorority programs department, for many campuses, this is an office of one. As was the case at WPI at the time, it is important to embrace that one of the most important components in the CAS Standards is an emphasis on stakeholder engagement and partnership. The work of the office cannot be successful without philosophical buy-in for the same goals and mission across the entire community. It was essential to engage the members of the Greek Life Task Force along with other stakeholders in developing recommendations and solutions.

The standards can help provide a guiding framework to establish best practices for the fraternity/sorority programs department. In the 13 years that followed, CAS remained important in the ongoing work. When WPI redesigned the relationship statement, the committee looked at CAS learning outcomes as a framework for what chapters and the university ought to be doing to support student development and success. When the department requested more staffing resources, the CAS Standards helped provide support for the needs. The department also published learning outcomes and evidence of those learning outcomes within the fraternity and sorority community guided by CAS outcomes.

Philosophically, the change was successful for several reasons. First, it engaged numerous stakeholders and made the CAS Standards accessible to these stakeholders. As a result, it was not just the campus professional dictating the direction and investment of resources, but the entire community representatively determining those priorities. This engendered trust and transparency. Second, it recognized fraternity/sorority life programs were not going to align with all the CAS standards in one year, but instead worked to incrementally make those changes over time. Third, it embraced that it is easy to lose sight of goals in day-to-day problem solving and constantly revisiting the standards as a regular community self-assessment was an important part of the process.

Thirteen Years Later

The WPI fraternity/sorority community moved from a place of crisis to a place of health in those thirteen years. While not without the same day-to-day challenges of some communities, the community has experienced unprecedented growth, with the addition of several new chapters and an increase in the overall percent of the student body with Greek affiliation from 27.9% in 2005 to 36.9% in 2017. The number of judicial incidents has declined. In 2004, there were 16 incidents among fraternities. Over the past 5 years, there has been an average of 5 adjudicated incidents per year. Over the years, nearly half of the chapters on the campus have been recognized as the best chapter of their respective organization nationally. The number of community service hours and philanthropic contributions have increased substantially. The number of service hours more than quadrupled and the dollars raised for charity increased more than five-fold.

Fraternity/sorority members experience a supportive academic environment as evidenced by the fact that Greek student academic performance exceeds the average WPI student with fewer students on academic warning, probation, or suspended compared to the overall student population. Additionally, the fraternity/sorority 4-year graduation rate exceeds the WPI average by more than 11%. Racial/ethnic diversity of the fraternal community is representative of the overall student population, demonstrating that students appear to be experiencing accessibility to the fraternity/sorority experience. Additionally, the one-semester retention has increased from 87.7% to 96.2%, indicating the new member experience is more positive for new members.

Applying Lessons Learned

The goal for WPI has not been just to implement new programs, but to enact several strategies recommended in the CAS Standards for supporting individual chapters. These included:

1) Building sustainable capacity in the community through leadership and community development among alumni and undergraduate leaders;

2) Fostering an environment within chapters that compels members to make principle-driven choices;

3) Incentivizing continual goal setting and forward chapter movement; and

4) Encouraging use of campus and national/regional resources to continually improve the fraternity/sorority student experience.

The CAS Standards provided a place to start. Using existing frameworks, such as the CAS Standards for FSAP, can be one way to take a step back and say, "we can solve this through auditing our delivery of programs and services and identifying where we can improve/make

changes" as well as "this is an opportunity for change to create the FSAP (and potentially the fraternity/sorority community) we want in place for the next time we have a crisis." The framework provided a mechanism to gauge the current state of the community. It then served as a constant touchpoint to set goals and monitor incremental change over time. Through this strategy, the WPI fraternity/sorority community moved from a community in crisis to a place of greater stability and health.

Managing a crisis in fraternity/sorority life can feel overwhelming. The intersection of addressing the incident(s), managing the relationships and politics, and enacting accountability while also restoring community standards can make this a very difficult process for fraternity/sorority professionals. WPI used the CAS Standards to implement a process of change that 13 years later continues to be a part of the culture for fraternity/sorority life. For other campuses, WPI's approach can be copied. It was not that the change process was revolutionary because few processes are and there is a lot to get in the way of a revolution when working with fraternity/sorority life. However, **it was intentional and purposeful,** using a framework that can be applied in any FSAP. Frameworks such as CAS Standards are certainly useful tools to manage all aspects of a FSAP, including crises.