CAS Update: Step Seven of Program Review - Closing the Loop

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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 issue emphasizes **the seventh stage of CAS program review, which focuses on closing the loop**. 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 an 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. You have also used this process to begin identifying some of the action items you think are most vital to become more strongly aligned with the CAS Standards and ultimately achieve a high performing FSAP.

It is now time to "close the loop," but what does this mean and is it really misleading to say that you "close" anything by using data to plan for other major modifications? By definition, to close the loop means four very important actions in your implementation: (1) developing plans to make changes to influence the achievement of outcomes; (2) ensuring that ongoing assessment is infused into your enactment of the action plan; (3) developing the process for keeping the action items updated, including timelines and steps to evaluate if the action items are no longer relevant; and (4) finding ways to keep key stakeholders involved and informed.

Plans to Influence Achievement of Outcomes. As explained in the last two issues of this series, it is important to identify actions (step five) and prepare a report (step six) that includes how the FSAP will address the findings in your self-assessment and program review. Those plans should be made public to the extent the institution permits as well as should be incorporated into the ongoing operations of the FSAP. This is what it means to close the loop in assessment: *to use evidence to identify priorities and enact strategies for their successful completion*. Some strategies will be very quick in their implementation (commonly referred to as "low hanging fruit") and may be done after a few actions and tactics are implemented. For example, if through the process it was determined that the FSAP needed to revamp its mission, then such a recommendation should take immediate priority and can be completed within a reasonably short period of time (three to four meetings may be sufficient to write/revise a good mission statement, though feedback from stakeholders may be valuable).

Some items will take more time. For example, if you wish to work with a key department on campus, such as student health and counseling, to improve the awareness of resources for fraternity/sorority members, that may seem easy but it may take some time. To expand the example and hopefully provide some ideas for any general longer-term plan, you may spend the first month or so working with the office to identify existing and potential resources, then you may work collaboratively with them to create fraternity/sorority community (FSC) buy-in to even incorporate the trainings into their education programs. Throughout this process you will identify key outcomes and ways to measure if the education efforts have been successful. You will have to identify the right time frame for launch of the effort and determine at what point you will regroup to evaluate progress.

All through this process you will need to ensure that the relationship with the department is maintained and they see you as a supportive colleague. While you may set up the systems in about six months or so, you will also have to renegotiate this each year as it is common in student affairs and FSAP work to launch an exciting new initiative, think it is working fine, or is not working, and then move to the next thing. If it is a priority that has been determined as a result of the self-assessment, program review, and strategic planning process, then it needs to stay in the forefront of your mind when leading the FSAP.

Assessing Progress in Closing the Loop. Keeping with the example provided in the previous section, how will you know if you are making progress in efforts to promote mental health resources to your members? What is the desired percentage or number of members that this program is to reach? What are the identified learning outcomes that will need to be measured?

How will students in chapters recognize this as a valuable undertaking? Those are just a few questions that may guide the enactment of this priority.

If it goes in your plan, there needs to be at least one identified approach to measurement. It is fine to collect numbers, ask questions on a survey, or evaluate satisfaction about these efforts, but there needs to be at least one approach to which the FSAP is committed to measure within the timeframe that is determined. Your prioritization of the action items will help you determine what is more important to assess with each. As we recommended in the last issue, you should prioritize your priorities: determine in year one what will be implemented and measured and year two, three, up to the appropriate number of years within your plan (recommend no more than three). Some things will be measured in an ongoing way (formative assessment) and some at the end of their current enactment (summative assessment).

Updating the Plan. Some people think that when you develop a plan and put it on paper that the thinking work is done, and it is now on to implementing and assessing as if every action item remains equally and unequivocally important. As you collect data, use it to evaluate if action items are still relevant and necessary. It is unlikely your big buckets of priorities will change: for example, collaborations will always be important and human resources expansion will be an ongoing area of focus, but the action items to achieve the goals articulated in these priorities can change and likely should change.

Determine an approach to evaluating these action items at least twice a year. With this process in place, you will be able to sit down with the identified team of people (such as your colleagues in the student health and counseling department) and discuss what's working and what may need to go by the wayside. Consider if the action item as written should be removed, revised, or reconsidered. Do not be afraid to remove items and consider how important it is to add many more. As you achieve some of those quick wins, evaluate what the action items are to keep that momentum going and infuse that into your plan. Your plan should be an overarching philosophy for your FSAP and some parts should not change (i.e. do not mess too often with mission or priorities). The actual document should be flexible, though, so do not be afraid to remove items and reassess timelines.

Keeping Stakeholders Engaged. A frustration often articulated by those involved in a planning process is the lack of communication that occurs after the plan is "done." A lot of time and energy may have been exerted by stakeholders in the self-assessment and program review process, as well as in prioritizing issues and determining action items. To simply leave them uninformed is a poor approach to leading these efforts. Identify ways to keep your most

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engaged stakeholders informed in an ongoing and meaningful way. You should also identify ways to keep stakeholders who may not have been highly engaged, but who have a high stake in the operations of the FSAP, including your Vice President/Provost and other senior institutional leaders, informed. We recommend updates twice a year, and those updates are best delivered after you have completed any updates to the plan.

Use a variety of communication approaches: emails, website updates, social media, skywriting — do it all so that people are clear that the time was worth it and that the plan is at the forefront of the FSAP agenda. Do not forget to update students in this process as you go through it. Additionally, advising/coaching of chapters should be grounded in the question of "how is the chapter positioned to help us achieve these goals" and through such a conversation, might the FSAP actively engage students in an ongoing attention to the plan "at their level." You may even want to map out with the chapter/council their own priorities within the plan and identify ways to work with them, as well as graduate member and alumni stakeholders in implementation.

Conclusion: Is Closing the Loop an Appropriate Term?

You have read this far and have been told about the priorities of the process of closing the loop. These are steps you should enact, and the concept of closing the loop is very much a focus of enacting a good self-assessment and program review process. [You can see almost any assessment model](#), whether four steps or fourteen, includes this practice as the vital "last step." That said, we believe it may lead people to falsely assume there is a closure process that really is not there. Think of the loop as more of a timeframe, say one year, and at the end of the year you close that loop and then start the next one while still attending to the same priorities, strategies, and action items that you did in the previous year. Whatever you do, always use the self-assessment and program review process as a framework for your planning and prioritization. Review often. Revise as needed. Update stakeholders. Make it a part of the culture and commitment of all who are involved in operating the FSAP.

In closing, step seven of the implementation of CAS program review dictates that closing the loop is now a priority. This article has explained some of the actions that are vital for the successful completion of this step. Consider that each year you may close the loop on the current implementation of the plan's priorities, but that the next year aspects may continue on. Approaches (new and old) to collect information about success will be implemented. Possibly most important is that this annual consideration of "the loop" is a chance to revisit progress toward the goal of using the self-assessment and program review process to improve the overall delivery of services and programs for the FSC by the FSAP.

In the August update, we will take a one-month break from the explanation of the self-assessment and program review cycle and provide an update on general CAS happenings within AFA and broadly across higher education. In September, we will pick up with a few more issues focused on tactics to successfully implement this process.