The Influence of the CAS Standards on Academic Advisors and Advising Programs

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Research on the influence of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) on academic advising is limited. Using a comparative case study method, I respond to this research gap by exploring how the standards influence practices of academic advising programs. Study results indicate that participating advisors knew little about the standards, practices were naturally aligned with the standards through the services provided, and the standards influenced programs when intentionally implemented. The findings of the study have implications for academic advisors, advising administrators, and CAS.

KEY WORDS: administration, advising profession, advisor role, evaluation and assessment, standards for advising and student services

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) claims to be "the pre-eminent force for promoting standards in student affairs, student services, and student development programs" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, n.d., para. 1). The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) encourages practitioners to use the standards developed and promoted by CAS to guide the programs and services they offer. However, little research has been conducted to determine the extent to which, if any, the CAS standards impact the practices of academic advising offices. Through this study, I address the gap in the literature by exploring how daily practices of academic advising offices are affected when that office self-identifies as using the CAS standards.

CAS was created in response to the need for established guidelines for both practice and preparation for the student affairs profession (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2006). A consortium of higher education professional associations, including the American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), came together in 1979 to develop, publish, and disseminate standards for practice in the student affairs field (Miller, 1996). "The purpose of CAS is to develop and promulgate standards that enhance the quality of a student's total learning experience in higher education" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2006, p.15).

CAS promotes self-regulation, which it asserts is more desirable than external regulation. CAS exhorts the principle that those within institutions know best about their own programs and services. CAS regularly revises the standards and publishes new editions of *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education*. The first edition of the *CAS Standards and Guidelines* became available in 1986 and covered 16 functional areas. The sixth edition of the standards, used for this study and published in 2006, addressed 35 functional areas, including academic advising, career services, learning assistance, and student leadership programs. CAS recently published the seventh edition of the standards, but the changes incorporated do not have implications for this study.

CAS defined functional area standards as statements that present "criteria describing the fundamental essential expectations of practice agreed upon by the profession at large for a given institutional function" (p. 363). The 2006 CAS standards for each functional area are made up of 13 parts: a) mission; b) program; c) leadership; d) organization and management; e) human resources; f) financial resources; g) facilities, technology, and equipment; h) legal responsibilities; i) equity and access; j) campus and external relations; k) diversity; l) ethics; and m) assessment and evaluation.

Contextual Background

The body of CAS-related literature is small. Most research related to CAS can be placed into one of three categories. The first definable category pertains to some of the earliest literature on the CAS standards and is concerned with introducing the standards to a particular functional area within higher education. In 1986, Jacoby and Thomas introduced the standards for commuter student programs in the *NASPA Journal* and NACADA introduced the standards to academic advisors (Caruso, 1986). In 1987, Materniak and Williams introduced the standards for learning assistance programs. These articles were solely reprints of the standards for each particular functional area. As a result of these early efforts, practitioners within

those functional areas became aware of the standards. However, the literature indicates that little effort was made at the time to consider how the standards could be successfully implemented. This is perhaps because knowledge of the standards was still quite limited.

As awareness of the CAS standards increased, student affairs professionals began to consider how to implement the standards across a variety of functional areas. This period defines the second category of CAS literature. For example, in 1989 Marron investigated the utilization of the standards by 4-year undergraduate colleges by surveying chief student-affairs officers. Later, Marron (1991) gave examples of colleges that were using the standards, discussed how they utilized the standards, and reviewed strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Marron concluded that the standards were being used creatively but that more institutions needed to know about and utilize them.

Mullendore and Biller (1993) identified two methods of standard implementation in relation to orientation programs, self-assessment guides, and program statements. They also discussed the importance of assessing and evaluating orientation programs. Miller (1999) addressed the use of CAS standards for orientation and suggested applying them to faculty governance-unit orientation programs. In a quantitative dissertation study on the use of the standards by directors of career services offices, Ratcliffe (2004) found that awareness of the CAS standards varied by years of experience, institutional size, and degree level of directors. These efforts illustrate the different ways in which professionals were trying to make use of the standards, but the previous researchers did not attempt to explore the influence of the standards on practitioners.

The third category of literature concerned the perceptions held by various student affairs practitioners of the CAS standards. In 1990, Grant determined "the relevancy of certain of the standards . . . in the evaluation of student affairs divisions in two-year colleges according to the perceptions of Chief Student Affairs Officers" (p. 7). In 1992, Stokes investigated how certain campus groups (i.e., faculty, administrators, trustees, students) rated the importance of the standards to housing and residential life programs. In a later study, Nadler and Miller (1997) reviewed the attitudes of chief student-affairs officers toward the standards for orientation programs, as these individuals determine the type of orientation program offered. Finally, Cooper and Saunders (2000) studied the perceived importance of the CAS "must" statements among student affairs practitioners and found that "the areas rated as most important to practice seemed to be broad, organizational concerns, such as legal and ethical behavior, collaboration, and appropriate financial management procedures" (p. 77). These studies are significant because they offer insight into practitioners' perceptions of the CAS standards. However, none delve into the influence of the standards on everyday practices, and none focus on academic advising.

While each of these categories provides a better understanding of the CAS standards, Creamer (2006) recently noted the lack of studies addressing the "effectiveness of programs and services that use CAS standards and guidelines" (para. 11). He stated that research was needed regarding the role of the standards and guidelines in "shaping educational programs and services" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2006, p. 5). In this current effort, I respond to the call for exploration in this area.

Conceptual Framework and Study Purpose

I utilized Hagerty and Stark's (1989) model of dimensions of programs, structures, and processes for comparative analysis of accreditation studies as the guiding framework for this study. The Hagerty and Stark model consists of seven dimensions: mission and goals, faculty, students, curriculum and educational programming, program administration and governance, resources and facilities, and evaluation, which are used "to examine the goal, structure, and process components" (Hagerty & Stark, 1989, p. 4) of accreditation standards. I selected this model for this study because it provided a stable and comprehensive frame through which to review the programs and practices of advising offices that utilize the CAS standards. It also served as an organizational device for data collection and analysis.

Through this study, I address the following question: How are daily practices of academic advising offices that purport to use the CAS standards influenced by the use of the standards? For a select group of these self-described programs, I identify the operational practices of these offices and determine how they have been implemented or revised because of the CAS standards.

Method

To explore the nature of CAS standards use, I deemed that a qualitative approach was most

appropriate. As Merriam (1998) noted, a qualitative study proves most useful for researchers with goals to better understand, describe, discover, and find meaning in a phenomenon. A qualitative approach provides a finely focused view of the influence of CAS standards on academic advising programs because it illustrates the ways the standards influence advising office and daily advisor practice as well as helps characterize advisors' interpretations and understandings of the standards.

A Comparative Case Study

I selected the comparative case study method, a specialized qualitative approach, because "in general, case studies are the preferred strategy . . . [when] the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 2003, p. 1). Yin defined a case study as a form of empirical inquiry used to investigate particular phenomena within their real-life settings.

Yin (2003) also discussed multiple-case studies, stating that multiple-case studies can be more compelling and robust than single-case studies. Results may be replicated, varied outcomes may lead to common conclusions, and findings can be more generalized in multiple cases than are typically yielded by a single case. Yin further stated that the number of cases chosen depends on the number of literal and theoretical replications desired.

I identified five campus advising offices for an on-site visit, in effect creating five comparative case studies. According to CAS (2006), the standards are applicable for staff and program development as well as self-study purposes. All sites visited for this study purport to use the CAS standards, but to increase theoretical replications, I chose the sites that used the standards in two of the three ways suggested: program development and self-study. Examples of program development include creation of advising appointment protocols, orientation presentations, or goals. Although two sites also used the standards for staff development, they were only used for that purpose in a minor way.

Sites

In this study, I included 16 participants from five advising offices across the United States. I conducted interviews at five colleges in late 2008 and early 2009. Site A, a large community college in the Southeast, utilized the CAS standards in a self-study process as did Site D, a small, public university in the Northeast. Site B, a small private college, and Sites C and E, both large public institutions, used the CAS standards for program development. Table 1 summarizes site information including the Carnegie classifications (Carnegie Foundation, n.d.) for each.

Initial contacts served as gatekeepers (provided names and contact information for participants) at each research site, identifying participants available for interviews. These initial contacts were found via e-mail solicitations to academic-advising electronic mailing lists, a web search, and connections made at NACADA conferences. All gatekeepers were also interviewed, with one exception. The gatekeeper at one site was not interviewed because none of his peers, high ranking administrators, would be interviewed at the other sites. At each site, I interviewed at least one advising administrator and two advisors. This strategy provided different perspectives on the same program and practices, thus offering enough information to formulate a clear picture of the program.

Data Collection

The main form of data collection for this study was done via interviewing. I formulated questions based on the research questions and the guiding framework. I intended to obtain an overall impression of the advising office I visited as well as to better understand the programs and services offered by each. Some of the questions were as follows (see Appendix A for the full list of interview questions):

- What are the pros and cons of the CAS standards?
- Describe the mission of your advising office as you perceive it.

Table 1. Site summary

Site	Type	Location	Use of Standards	No. of Students	Carnegie Classification
A	Public	Southeast	Self-study	11,000	2 year
B	Private	Mid-Atlantic	Program development	2,500	Master's level
C	Public	Mid-Atlantic	Program development	23,000	High research
D	Public	Northeast	Self-study	6,700	Master's level
E	Public	Southwest	Program development	23,000	High research

- How do the CAS standards influence you as an advisor?

After visiting the first institution, Site A, I quickly ascertained from a review of interviewee responses that advisors may not be aware of the impact of CAS standards on Site A office practices. Thus, I formulated an alternate set of questions for future interviews in which interviewees demonstrate a lack of CAS standard knowledge. These new questions mined contextual information and gave further insight into advising program practices and office structures, services, and programs. See Appendix B for a full list of these alternative questions.

"Documents corroborate your observations and interviews and thus make your findings more trustworthy" (Glesne, 2006, p. 65), and they also prove relevant to almost every case study (Yin, 2003). Therefore, in addition to the interviews, I also reviewed additional relevant documents such as advising office handouts, advising office web sites, and program reviews. A review of handouts and web sites provided insight into how the CAS standards were contextualized in information targeted toward students. Program review documents revealed the reasons that CAS standards were utilized or how they were utilized in the self-study process.

Analysis

In the first step in the analysis, I transcribed verbatim the interview recordings into the written word. "Verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 88). In this study, I started the transcription process before completing all interviews in case questions needed to be added, deleted, or altered. After data from each site were transcribed, I thoroughly read all the collected documents.

After all transcriptions were complete and after the initial document review, I coded the documents and transcriptions. Glesne (2006) defined coding as a process of "sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data" (p. 152). I coded information based on Hagerty and Stark's (1989) framework and the research questions. Some parts of the interview narrative fit more than one code. For example, a portion of an interview may speak to both the mission and goals dimensions and the program administration and governance dimensions of the framework.

To increase validity, I accomplished triangulation via comparison of interview transcripts with document reviews and through member checking. I e-mailed each participant a copy of his or her interview transcript and asked him or her to provide feedback. I also kept a research journal throughout the process so I could reflect upon emergent thoughts, ideas, and issues not covered in the interviews and documents as well as to record personal thoughts and concerns. Glesne (2006) suggested that writing down thoughts as the analysis begins as a way to free "your mind for new thoughts and perspectives" (p. 148). "Reflexivity is the most important characteristic of fieldwork, and of analysis" (Delamont, 2004, p. 226). It helps the researcher strive for reliability and validity.

Results

Study results indicate that the practices of advising offices aligned with the CAS standards. In some instances, the standards directly influenced practice, while in others, the reasons for the alignment to the standards remain unclear. The CAS standards exert the most influence on practice when a champion promotes and implements them.

Unclear Influence of the CAS Standards

Data analysis revealed that several practices across the programs aligned with the CAS standards. However, data did not reveal whether these practices were a result of CAS standards use or reflect a natural alignment with the CAS standards simply through the services these offices provided. In a practice evident across all five sites, offices hired advisors with proper credentials. The CAS standards call for an advanced degree or a combination of education and experience. All advisors interviewed held a graduate or a bachelor's degree with numerous years of higher education experience.

According to CAS standards, advising programs should outline expectations for advisors and advisees. Most of the advising programs studied outlined advisor and advisee expectations, but they did so in varying ways. Site A published the expectations in the advising manual while Site B included them in a slide show for orientation. Site C expressed advisor goals and teaching outcomes along with student goals and learning outcomes. Advisor and advisee expectations were not found at Site D or E, but both sites articulated learning objectives for students. Perhaps these objectives were used, rather than statements of advisee expectations, to more closely align practices with the advising-as-teaching theme. Advising as teaching

has become a guiding metaphor within NACADA (Hagen & Jordan, 2008). It moves advisors away from the developmental theory perspective and brings more emphasis to the teaching and learning involved in the advising process.

Three of the five sites visited did not use student learning outcomes. However, the two other programs used them as a direct result of the CAS standards. In addition, the goals of these advising programs were informed by the standards and the evaluations for students measured the programs based on these goals.

The CAS standards call for evaluation of advisors and advising programs. All the research sites had some sort of assessment procedure in place. This is not surprising. Schuh (2008) stated that assessment has become a central aspect of higher education. As one participating advisor said, "[The CAS standards] are the reason we have assessment practices in the office. . . . That's why we do our evaluations. To show that we are doing the things that we should be doing and making sure we have happy students."

Direct Influence of the CAS Standards

Data analysis revealed that the use of the CAS standards did, in fact, directly influence the practices of the advising programs studied. In the interviews, participants pinpointed specific practices influenced by the use of the CAS standards. The administrator at Site A stated that the CAS standards affected the advising of students who want to transfer from that community college to a 4-year institution. "So I think that the department . . . has really been more intentional in providing that information up-front and laying out all the information to a student." An advisor at Site A believed that the self-study process and the standards had influenced the way in which advisors were trained: "I think maybe we did more advisor training afterwards."

The administrator stated that Site C implemented a decision-making workshop due to the CAS standards. The workshop was required of undeclared students in an effort to get them to explore educational and career goals. In addition, other processes at Site C included evaluating and assessing the advising program and advisors. Each student advised by the program completes a paper evaluation after each advising session. Also, a campus-wide advising evaluation is done every few years.

The administrator at Site C stated:

> We're all about assessment here. I guess [the CAS standards] really did [influence our assessment practices] because the assessment is based upon the goals that we have in the catalog for advising, which were created based on the standards. So since those came from that, it's indirectly related.

The Site C administrator further stated that the standards also impacted the formatting of the student satisfaction survey.

At Site E, advising appointments are guided by protocols; that is, advisors use talking points within the sessions. According to the administrator at Site E, these practices were guided by the CAS standards:

> We have some protocols that whenever we meet with students, our goals are to approach these areas, obviously leaving room for professionals to be professional and put their own stamp, their own flavor, on how they do that. It's not like a script, but it is more like a checklist. Have we covered these things? Have we talked about these things?

At Site E, each appointment is characterized by established learning objectives and an outline. These objectives and the appointment outline relate to the CAS student learning and development outcomes. For example, part of the outline calls for advisors to assess the reasons the student chose to attend Site E. This practice ties to several CAS student learning and development outcomes from part two (program) of the CAS standards, including personal and education goals, realistic self-appraisal, and clarified values.

An administrator at Site E also stated that the standards influenced the assignment of advisees to staff members:

> The way that the CAS standards have influenced operational decisions is we recognize that our staff need to have a population, they need to know who they are, and they need to be able to actively work the population. If we don't equip them with those resources to be able to do that or we're always shifting people around then we're undermining that relationship, we're undermining continued investment from one person. . . . So that's one of those places that operationally speaking, yeah, having adequate resources and using those resources well and being able to assess how well we're using those resources

[is important].

Championing the CAS Standards

Additional results indicated that the standards can significantly influence programs and services offered by an office, especially if they have a champion, someone who promotes the standards and is willing to work for implementing them into office practices and procedures. In this study, the advising administrators were the champions for the standards, particularly at Site E.

The two Site E administrators interviewed firmly attested that their advising program benefited from use of the CAS standards. However, the lower level administrator was the champion. Although the standards were used prior to the arrival of this administrator, he was the driving force behind their implementation. According to the upper level administrator:

> We literally keep them [the CAS standards] in front of us at all times. Every decision that we make is based on the CAS standards as well as our strategic plan and what the university says its strategic plan is. . . . It seems to us at this point that we are in as [much] alignment as we can possibly think of. We were not in alignment as much prior to [this administrator]. His position and his talents and skill sets have helped us to focus on embedding and aligning [the CAS standards] in every aspect of what we do.

Discussion

Study results revealed a number of unanticipated findings. Despite the sense that the CAS standards are used widely by the academic advising profession, I had difficulty finding study sites extolling the use of them. A surprisingly small number of responses were received to the electronic mailing list solicitations. This low response rate may be the result of advisors and administrators feeling that their limited use of CAS precluded them from participating in the research, few programs using the standards, or potential participants not having the time or impetus to respond to my query. Regardless of the reason, few advising offices were eager to identify themselves as the potential site for a study on the use of CAS standards.

Furthermore, the study starkly revealed that the academic advisors in the advising offices visited knew little to nothing about the CAS standards. Many advisors expressed concern before their interviews began that they would be questioned about the standards and be expected to know them in-depth. Some stated that they had read over them prior to their interview but that this brief review was their only exposure to them:

> She did show me a link to the . . . C – A – S? . . . The CAS, ooh, I got the acronym right. Um, and I briefly scanned it, but if someone said, "What do you think of CAS standards?" I would have no earthly idea. (Advisor, Site B)

Others did not admit such a fact, but some of their answers indicated that they were unfamiliar with the standards. Others simply said that they knew nothing about them. For example, when asked, "What do you know about the CAS standards as they relate to advising?" one advisor stated, "Absolutely nothing."

Relevance to Academic Advising

Because of the lack of research on the effectiveness of the CAS standards, this study proves relevant to academic advising research and practice. However, more quantitative and qualitative research is needed regarding all of the functional areas covered by the CAS standards. Who are using the standards and how? Are they using them effectively? Do the standards influence programs, practices, and practitioners? Perhaps most important, do the CAS standards impact the students served? The interested researcher can select from many avenues available and address many questions left unanswered to date.

Bryan and Mullendore (1991) listed nine reasons for implementing CAS standards within the student affairs profession: program development, accreditation self-study, staff development, comparisons across institutions, development and enhancement of program credibility, institutional acceptance of programs and departments, education of the campus community, improved political maneuverability, and budgetary assistance. They offered this rationale because at the time few institutions had operationalized the CAS standards.

Almost 20 years after Bryan and Mullendore's article, institutions in general, and advising offices in particular, according to this study, still have not found easy ways to operationalize the CAS standards. Participants indicated that, due to the comprehensive nature of the standards, implementation was difficult and almost impractical. However, this study also revealed that the CAS standards offer several benefits to those advising programs that use them.

The CAS standards can be used to provide structural support to a program and a framework for program review. In times of economic hardship and cuts in higher education, academic advising administrators may find themselves in the unfortunate position of defending their importance to a student's education. The CAS standards can give a program more credibility and leverage. As time and budgets crunch, stakeholders can easily forget that students are individuals. The study revealed that the standards serve to give advising administrators and practitioners a holistic view of both their programs and their students.

> But I did go online [to look at the CAS standards] and just kind of scanned it actually last night and it just looks very holistic. They kind of look at all different aspects of it, it's so much more than "do you have your 15 to 18 credits and are you going to graduate in four years?" [CAS] really understands that it is a much more holistic, complete model of advising. (Advisor, Site B)

Two people in the study stated that the standards brought credibility to their advising program. The advising administrator at Site B felt more confident and comfortable bringing advising information to the faculty because the information was informed by a national set of standards: "The fact that they are not produced by NACADA, that they are an outside standard, is awfully helpful." The administrator at Site C agreed that having a national set of standards not created by an academic advising organization gave more credence to institutional decisions. The standards seem to be beneficial for those advising programs that need to garner support from other campus areas.

The study also illustrates that practitioners can use the CAS standards as a tool against which to measure themselves. The administrator at Site A mentioned this fact when discussing the use of the standards for the institutional self-study process: "The pros are that we can look ourselves in the mirror and say, 'well okay we didn't score real high on this particular category but look at all the other ratings that we received, that we earned.'"

One administrator at Site E acknowledged that having standards on which to compare themselves was an advantage. Another administrator at Site E expanded this thought:

> So whenever you want to measure us, measure us against these standards. Don't measure us against other departments or what we've done in the past. But measure us against the highest standards. If that's [our] mission, is to do that, then I'm telling you these are the national standards, let's measure ourselves against this.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, I offer three recommendations. First, the staff of CAS may want to find ways to make the standards easy to integrate and communicate with other accreditation standards. Often, stakeholders do not seek standards until a school is going through the reaccreditation process. If the CAS standards meshed well with other accreditation standards, usage might increase.

Second, the CAS staff may want to utilize the standards in assessment programs that allow participants to receive a CAS-compliant seal of approval. This recognition of individual programs would signal to the profession that the program meets certain criteria. CAS compliant programs could serve as models of best practices in the field and could be used as a recruiting tool.

Finally, academic advising administrators should work to include all staff members in planning, assessing, and structuring office programs and services. Increasing communication via staff meetings or office retreats could improve staff morale and knowledge. At the least, staff members would understand why they are asked to complete certain tasks. Their knowledgeable feedback could, in turn, be used improve their own office.

Although academic advising programs may be quite effective without the use of the CAS standards, using the standards can provide some benefits, including lending credibility to a program. This, at times, may be essential as budgets get smaller and colleges and universities make drastic cuts. As the profession trends toward the use of student learning outcomes, the CAS standards could prove to be invaluable tools in helping programs shape their outcomes.

The standards offer a holistic perspective of both programs and students. Ultimately, academic advisors want to serve their students to the best of their ability. The CAS standards can function as a tool to help them do so. CAS needs to tackle the challenge of making the standards easy-to-use and adaptable tools.

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Appendix A. First set of questions asked about CAS standards

1. Describe the mission of your advising office as you perceive it.
2. Describe your general job responsibilities.
3. Describe your advising office's services and programs.
4. From your perspective, how do the CAS standards relate to the profession of academic advising?
5. How is your academic advising office intentionally using the CAS standards? How long have they been used in this way? What prompted the use of the standards?
6. Describe a time when the use of the CAS standards influenced a policy implemented by your advising office. What policy was influenced? How? Which part of the standards prompted this policy? Who was involved? How were they involved?
7. Describe a time when the use of the CAS standards influenced an operational practice in your advising office. What practice was influenced? How? Which part of the standards prompted this practice? Who was involved? How were they involved?
8. What are the pros and cons of the CAS standards?
9. How do the CAS standards influence you as an advisor?
10. How do the CAS standards influence your students?
11. How do the CAS standards influence your advising office's administration or governance?
12. How do the CAS standards influence your advising office's available resources?
13. How do the CAS standards influence your advising office's assessment practices?

Appendix B. Alternative set of questions asked about CAS standards

The following questions were created once it was discovered that the advisors being interviewed may have little to no knowledge of the CAS standards:

- Describe your general job responsibilities.
- Describe the mission of advising at this school as you perceive it.
- Tell me about advising at this school.
- How long have you been an advisor?
- Describe the students you advise.
- How does the advising office support you?
- What are the strengths of the advising program? The challenges?
- What improvements do you think would enhance the efforts of advising here?
- What do you know about the CAS standards as they relate to advising?
- Tell me a story about a student that sticks out in your mind.