

Background Research: Technical Assistance to Student Assistance Programs

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Technical Assistance to Student Assistance Programs

Rationale

School-based Student Assistance Programs (SAPs) organize and facilitate access to social and mental health services for students and families through an approach that includes identifying and assessing problems, ensuring the appropriate amount of intervention, and providing case management and follow-up to problems (Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Utilizing a team approach, SAPs comprehensively address students' social, emotional, and mental health issues that create barriers to learning. Although one function of SAPs is to facilitate treatment for students who are experiencing problems with substance abuse, an effective SAP may also function to indirectly prevent substance use before it starts (Palmer & Paisley, 1991).

A major challenge of all seemingly effective prevention efforts is moving from research conditions to broader dissemination while maintaining the critical components that led to effectiveness (Feinberg, 2004). The same is true for the implementation of SAPs. Technical Assistance is a strategy that has been used to enhance the implementation of evidence-based programs with prevention-focused community coalitions. Much of the available literature regarding technical assistance efforts in prevention has focused on the provision of assistance to community coalitions (Mitchell et al., 2004). Student Assistance Programs, given their role of facilitating multiple services within a school setting, have a level of complexity that mirrors that of coalition efforts. As with coalitions, technical assistance to school teams charged with implementing the SAP process appears to have great potential. However, technical assistance providers supporting SAPs face similar challenges as those faced by providers supporting coalitions.

Technical assistance is frequently utilized to assist organizations, groups and teams in assessing and improving the quality of their efforts. Florin (1993, citing Suarez & Montgomery, 1989) refers to technical assistance as a process that involves interventions which transfer knowledge and/or skill to client groups, helping them to develop or improve organizations, programs, products, services, delivery systems, and/or internal operations. Using the term *facilitation*, Stetler and colleagues (Stetler et al., 2006) describe technical assistance as the process of playing a key role in helping individuals and teams understand areas of need and how to address those areas, in order to successfully implement best practice or evidenced-based programs.

Technical assistance/facilitation tends to unfold differently depending on the particular field. The purpose of technical assistance ranges from providing assistance to achieve a specific goal, to working with a team to analyze, reflect, and improve on current practices. Based on their study of healthcare systems, Stetler et al. (2006) describe facilitation as "a well-planned, proactive, supportive, and mediating change agent role, and thus a discrete intervention that can enable site activation and enhance implementation of new, evidence-based practices."

The belief in the promise of technical assistance has caused a number of groups—including government organizations—to set up systems and structures for the delivery of technical assistance. In these efforts, technical assistance is utilized to improve both the quality and fidelity of the prevention programs implemented, as well as the organizational structure of the group or coalition implementing the

programs. In these instances, technical assistance is focused on building capacity within the group that is supporting the prevention programs.

Intervention programs are typically difficult to implement, especially when they involve higher levels of complexity, such as coordinating and collaborating with other organizations doing similar work (Florin, 2006). The need for training and technical assistance to support intervention and health promotion efforts is well documented, and has generally been supported by the standard variety of training strategies. Unfortunately, it remains unclear whether the typical array of workshops, conferences, and presentations has resulted in any transfer of training. Additionally, data from coalitions who have received training indicate a need for ongoing support beyond single events (Butterfoss, 2004).

While technical assistance appears to have positive influence on change in medicine, education, and community services, there is limited literature on the identification of technical assistance needs and the provision of technical assistance services for community coalitions (Feinberg, 2004). Mitchell describes the apparent disconnect between the growth of technical assistance efforts and the lack of supporting research, stating that “enthusiasm for technical assistance has, however, quickly outstripped our knowledge of the optimal ways to design, promote, deliver and evaluate these interventions” (Mitchell et al., 2004). Unfortunately, there are few empirical studies on technical assistance, and the studies that exist have lacked a clear description of the technical assistance provided (Mitchell et al., 2004; Stetler et al., 2006).

Many questions remain, including what is the appropriate “dose” of technical assistance, and how this assistance should be tailored to specific interventions such as SAPs. It is likely that the precise amount of technical assistance needed to create outcomes varies depending on the type and complexity of the intervention effort. It also remains unclear how technical assistance services can be designed to reach those in the greatest need of help.

Technical Assistance Implementation: Effective Practices

Technical Assistance Need and Utilization

Several investigators have attempted to address some of the significant questions regarding the determination of technical assistance need and delivery. In a study of technical assistance provision to prevention coalitions, coalition members were asked to rate the degree to which they used the technical assistance services, and the factors that impacted their use of these services. Interestingly, the failure to use technical assistance services was associated with a lack of a clear sense of need about the services, as opposed to a limited interest or desire to use the services (Mitchell et al., 2004).

The failure to use technical assistance was not directly correlated with the strength of the coalition (i.e., the hypothesis that “stronger coalitions no longer need technical assistance”). In fact, coalitions with lower capacity were more likely to have difficulty defining their needs and deciding what assistance they needed. These lower functioning coalitions were actually less likely to utilize the technical assistance services than their higher performing peers.

The age and developmental level of the coalition also had an impact on the utilization of technical assistance. New coalitions differed from veteran coalitions in their prioritization of technical assistance needs. Newer coalitions were interested in receiving technical assistance on building the knowledge and skills of individual members, while veteran coalitions were most concerned with long-term planning.

Given these findings, Mitchell suggests the following factors should be considered when providing technical assistance.

- Technical assistance providers must balance the technical assistance needs as seen by the consumer with their own assessment of the functioning of the group.
- Technical assistance needs are likely to be much greater assisting with complex strategies such as coalitions and Student Assistance Programs.
- Technical assistance providers need to be clear with the recipients of services regarding the time commitment involved in participating in and completing the technical assistance process.
- Technical assistance providers should provide a clear framework as to how their intervention leads to particular outcomes, even if that framework is more theoretically than empirically based.

Several studies have noted concerns regarding the ability of participants to accurately reflect the true needs and problems that serve as the basis for determining technical assistance. Each individual's role within a group or coalition may also influence their perceived need for technical assistance services. In their study of the Communities that Care project, Feinberg and colleagues (2004) found that program directors reported less need for technical assistance around leadership development, while other coalition participants reported a greater need for this type of assistance. While not statistically significant, the authors believed that these results illustrate the bias that can occur from determining technical assistance needs from any single group or segment within a coalition.

Feinberg also found that the level of coalition effectiveness was primarily responsible for perceived technical assistance need. In general, low coalition functioning and lack of perceived coalition effectiveness were associated with a greater need for technical assistance. Lower functioning coalitions perceived higher technical assistance needs in the areas of leadership development and coalition building support, while higher functioning coalitions expressed a need for assistance with fundraising and development. Feinberg's experience indicates that even well functioning coalitions still need technical assistance in program areas such as determining appropriate programs for conditions, identifying empirically-based programs, and using sound criteria in program selection.

Feinberg recommends that some level of outside assessment be instituted to accurately determine both the need for and the level of technical assistance. The results of several studies indicate the potential utility of assessment tools for providers to assist in assessing technical assistance needs. The use of such tools would allow for both an internal and external perspective of technical assistance need.

Technical Assistance Provider Characteristics and Skills

Jolly and colleagues (2003) studied the use of technical assistance to community based organizations (CBOs) engaged in HIV prevention efforts. The focus of the assistance was to increase the capacity of the CBOs to implement effective evaluation of their programs. The researchers gathered qualitative data on the CBOs' experiences with technical assistance. From this data, they summarized the experiences of the CBOs and created recommendations for increasing the quality of technical assistance.

- Technical assistance should be tailored to each organization's unique needs. This customization of technical assistance requires a great deal of interaction between the provider and the recipient of services. As much as possible, technical assistance systems should provide long-term, consistent relationships with the organizations they are serving. CBOs preferred technical assistance providers who were regularly accessible to them through phone calls and meetings.

They especially appreciated providers who met timelines and responded promptly to calls for assistance.

- Technical assistance providers should consider the resources and expertise available to the recipient when determining their technical assistance plan. CBOs appreciated technical assistance providers who understood the real-world nature of their work and the challenges they faced. They also valued technical assistance providers who had specific subject matter expertise—in this instance, HIV prevention programming.
- Technical assistance providers should refrain from using jargon and technical terms. CBOs preferred technical assistance providers who were easy to understand and could speak about evaluation in lay terms.
- In order to work effectively within the cultural context of the organizational and community setting, technical assistance providers must be culturally competent. CBOs had a preference for providers who were of the population's culture or, at the very least, were willing to be educated by the CBO regarding the culture of the population in which they were working.
- Technical assistance should work collaboratively with the recipients of services. CBOs preferred working with providers who took a partnership approach with their technical assistance provision and did not impose their personal opinions on the organization.

In a study of the Rhode Island Tobacco Control Enhancement Project, Florin examined a state-university-community technical assistance system designed to build capacity of community-based coalitions to implement tobacco control interventions (Florin et al., 2006). Project coordinators were asked to assess their experience with the technical assistance provided. In particular, project coordinators valued technical assistance providers who were sensitive to the issues that made their project unique. Such issues included organizational setting and the population the project served.

Project coordinators were aware that technical assistance benefits come at a cost to the staff and project. For example, working with a technical assistance provider takes time and energy and potentially diverts attention from other tasks. The majority of recipients expressed that the benefits equaled or exceeded the costs of participating in the technical assistance.

The authors noted the need for a shared language and understanding of a theory of change for both the technical assistance providers and the CBOs. They encouraged other projects involving technical assistance work with service recipients to develop a shared theory of change (e.g., logic model) to use as a reference for all participants and to provide focus for technical assistance plans.

Butterfoss (2004) created and piloted the Coalition Technical Assistance and Training (CTAT) Framework to provide training and technical assistance to Virginia's Healthy Start Initiative. The CTAT Framework is a six-step process designed to be completed in a six- to twelve-month period. The theoretical underpinnings of the framework include Community Coalition Action Theory, which describes how coalitions move through stages of development, and provides hypotheses for such processes as leadership, assessment, and planning. Additionally, the framework relies on the concept of innovation adoption, which is an aspect of diffusion theory. While the rate at which individuals adopt new innovations varies, technical assistance is uniquely situated to address these variations. The technical assistance provider implementing the CTAT Framework can respond to the changeable capacity and developmental stages of coalitions and groups. This is a luxury that single event trainings do not share, as they must necessarily focus on the similarities between groups. Because the first step in the framework is assessment, the process naturally begins where the coalition is currently functioning. Specific goals and actions evolve from that point forward.

In the CTAT study, Butterfoss (2004) identified basic competencies needed by technical assistance consultants to implement the steps of the CTAT framework with coalitions. These competencies include:

- Knowledge of coalition research and coalition effectiveness.
- Experience in building and maintaining coalitions.
- Experience with assessment and evaluation methods such as interviewing, content analysis, and observation.
- Good communication and negotiation skills.

In a study of facilitators working in healthcare systems, Stetler identified characteristics that led to relationships that were perceived as successful (Stetler et al., 2006). These providers had the following characteristics:

- Understood evidence and were seen as credible to the site-level individuals.
- Had good communication skills, including being friendly and open to being contacted.
- Had good problem-solving skills.
- Were flexible and responsive to the needs of the site.
- Had a history of relevant experience and needed skills.

In this study, greater perceived success was a result of the team attitude that the facilitator was supporting. Teams that held a positive view of technical assistance and recognized its value were also associated with higher perceived success of the process.

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) assists policymakers and practitioners in implementing initiatives that strengthen the local juvenile justice system. In this effort OJJDP has developed a network of providers who deliver targeted training and technical assistance. In partnership with these providers, OJJDP has developed core standards for effective practice in the delivery of training and technical assistance. Along with these standards, OJJDP has highlighted the following strategies to ensure the quality of technical assistance:

- Agency administrators must understand and be committed to the technical assistance process, especially when extensive resources—from both the technical assistance provider and agency staff—are involved.
- Fully assessing the technical assistance need is a critical step in providing effective technical assistance. Providers must understand the specific nature of the problem and its context in order to be responsive to the technical assistant recipient.
- Technical assistance should be delivered at a rate and level that meets the recipient's needs. This requires the technical assistance provider to engage in careful assessment, planning, and delivery of assistance.
- The most effective process for technical assistance engages the recipient of the services as a partner throughout the process
- Technical assistance providers should be selected based on their subject matter expertise, communication skills, experience, and understanding of the cultural context of the community, program, and target population.

Outcomes

As noted earlier, there is limited empirical evidence available regarding detailed processes and impacts of technical assistance. What is available generally points to organizational outcomes specific to the functioning of the team or coalition receiving the technical assistance. Some organizational outcomes noted in the literature are listed below:

- In a case study by Stevenson and colleagues concerning technical assistance to community-based organizations, greater levels of technical assistance were associated with greater evaluation capacity (Mitchell et al., 2004).
- Florin and colleagues (2006) found that coordinators of a project to build capacity to implement tobacco control interventions believed that the technical assistance they received either equaled the costs associated with participating (e.g., time and energy), or felt the costs were outweighed by the benefits.
- Florin and colleagues found that all partners in the tobacco control projects benefited from a shared theory of change that was clearly articulated in a logic model. These logic models helped to ensure that participants were sharing the same language, and kept the technical assistance efforts on track.
- In his evaluation of a framework for technical assistance used to support regional perinatal councils, Butterfoss (2004) found that providing technical assistance utilizing a clear framework had positive impacts on the work of these coalitions. In particular, he noted increased achievement of coalition goals, strengthening of existing coalitions, development of teams in underserved areas, and increased use of data in guiding intervention efforts. The main costs of this approach were related to personnel, travel, and communication.
- High quality technical assistance appeared to be an important factor facilitating the implementation of tobacco coalitions (Feinberg et al., 2004).
- In a study of Communities that Care prevention boards, on-site technical assistance dosage predicted a small but statistically significant improvement in board functioning in the following year, especially for younger coalitions and those that exhibited a higher level of functioning initially (Feinberg et al., 2008).

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Standards for Technical Assistance to Student Assistance Programs (SAP TA)

Providers delivering technical assistance to a student assistance program (SAP TA) must

1. Provide direct technical assistance to the SAP team about the student assistance process, rather than about individual cases. The CGP may not serve as a member of a Student Assistance Program team, but as a provider of consultation/technical assistance.
2. Demonstrate that each CGP staff member assigned to the program activity completes and annually updates a Professional Assessment & Development Plan. Using this plan, CGPs will determine their own level of SAP TA skill mastery based on the following levels:
 - SAP TA Provider – basic skill level.
 - SAP TA Specialist – intermediate skill level.
 - SAP TA Expert – advanced skill level.
 - The CGP must request that a representative from the Illinois Student Assistance Center reviews and provides written feedback on the SAP Professional Development & Assessment Plan annually to provide guidance.
3. Demonstrate that all CGP staff assigned to the program activity advances beyond the SAP TA Provider skill level within two years.
4. Provide the names of schools and communities participating in SAP TA to the Illinois Student Assistance Center on an annual basis.
5. At minimum, implement the following processes with at least one SAP per fiscal year:
 - Coordinate with the Illinois Student Assistance Center to complete the Student Assistance Program Landscape Questionnaire, and annually update, to assess SAP level of development.
 - Complete the SAP Technical Assistance Plan (annually updated) that defines the SAP's stage of development, goals for advancement of best practices, and the intended technical assistance to be provided.
6. For all SAPs receiving technical assistance, document the schools/districts served and nature of the technical assistance provided, summarized across all SAPs receiving technical assistance.
7. Demonstrate that future technical assistance plans are based on the developmental goals of the SAP and the developmental goals of the CGP.