BEST PRACTICES OF CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OR ASSET-BASED ASSESSMENT: A RESEARCH REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Drug use continues to be a significant problem in the United States, with adolescent drug use particularly damaging due to its detrimental effects on the physical and mental development of young people, and its potential impact on their opportunities later in life. Recent study data suggests that nearly 40% of 12th-graders, 28% of 10th-graders, and 12.9% of eighth-graders used an illicit drug in 2017 (Monitoring the Future, 2017). About 1 in 4 young adults aged 18 to 25 were current illicit drug users (SAMHSA, 2018). Though rates did not significantly change in 2018 for adolescent use of most illicit substances, the prevalence of substance abuse remains alarmingly high and presents a formidable challenge for prevention and intervention efforts (Monitoring the Future, 2018).

Recent research demonstrates that needs assessments have the potential to inform and increase the positive effects of substance use prevention and intervention programs for young people. Various emerging assessment models and strategies have met with success in improving the development and implementation of substance abuse initiatives. Crozier and Melchior (2013) found that university students given an assignment in surveying community assets, or asset mapping, identified essential community needs and resources that could be harnessed to plan and implement evidence-based, data-driven interventions. Research by Williams et al. (2011) found that the application of a social ecology model to conduct assessments of substance abuse among youth in rural Missouri provided health educators with the means to identify key behavior influences, aiding the formulation of effective prevention and intervention methods.

Addressing the gap between prevention research and practice, Arthur and Blitz (2000) concluded that applying prevention science as a model could assist in pinpointing prevention needs, identifying resources, and developing strategic, evidence-based community prevention systems. Hoefer and Chigbu (2013) investigated the ability of an AIDS service program to successfully conduct the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF)—a multi-faceted strategic planning model designed to increase implementation of prevention and early intervention programs. They determined that the program progressed toward providing sustainable and culturally appropriate services, and increased awareness of the SPF could aid social workers in creating, applying, and sustaining community-based prevention program.

CITATIONS

Monitoring the Future. *National Survey Results on Drug Use*. Institute for Social Research. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, January 2018.
http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-overview2017.pdf

Monitoring the Future. *National Adolescent Drug Trends in 2018*. Institute for Social Research. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, December 2018.
http://monitoringthefuture.org//pressreleases/18drugpr.pdf

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2018). *Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (HHS Publication No. SMA 18-5068, NSDUH Series H-53). Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2017-nsduh-annual-national-report

ARTICLE 1: PLANNING TO SUCCEED: A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC PREVENTION FRAMEWORK

SUMMARY

Responding to problems associated with traditional strategic planning models and processes, in 2008 the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) developed the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) in an effort to strategically confront the challenges of risky health behaviors in certain populations. **Designed to increase implementation of prevention and early intervention programs in communities around the country, the SPF incorporates assessment, capacity, planning, implementation, and evaluation—with each stage in the process driven by cultural competence, community involvement, and sustainability.** Built on merging recent life course development research, preventive intervention trials, and community epidemiology, the SPF is a modified form of strategic planning which resonates with emerging prevention science initiatives (p. 43-49).

This first of its kind process-evaluation study—conducted through the use of program documents, an open-ended survey, and guided conversations with staff members—assessed how closely Project Stay Free, a community-based AIDS service program in Dallas, Texas, used the SPF according to SAMHSA guidelines. **There were a number of successes in the needs assessment stage that merit additional description, with the hope that these may contribute**

to an understanding of "best practices" in needs assessment and asset-mapping. First, Project Stay Free acknowledged that the process of conducting a comprehensive needs assessment was "laborious," involving "many hours of staff time," much interaction with the key stakeholders, and involved an outside consultant "who specializes in group processes" (p. 51). Second, the initiative included a number of gatekeepers whose community standing and experience was vital to completing the needs assessment, such as a nurse at a local health center, a worker in student services, and a professor at one of the universities. Third, the needs assessment was completed on time and with little revision necessary. This seemed to build trust and work to cement the value of the initiative.

Results demonstrate that the program made significant achievements, accomplishing the first three steps of the process and preparing to implement evidence-based programs targeting college-aged youth, veterans, and the reentry population. The study offered several lessons. First, sustainability must begin at the inception of the SPF process, involving high-level stakeholders from other organizations who will actively participate, push the effort in a positive direction, and steer their organizations toward long-term collaboration through coalition building. **Second, engaging potential client groups through influential, trusted individuals is essential.** Third, the needs of the target population should drive the choice of intervention, however there is no automatic assurance of implementation for a gender-sensitive, research-based, culturally competent program after it has been selected (p. 50-57).

Project Stay Free's fidelity to the SPF process, as well as its progress toward providing sustainable and culturally appropriate services, demonstrates a successful approach to growing a culturally sensitive, community-based prevention program—making the use of the SPF advantageous to work by communities and agencies addressing other areas of need. **Despite the need for more research investigating the success of SPF-based programs on risk reduction in certain populations, the study showed positive outcomes for a community-based agency's ability to effectively implement the SPF.** Social workers should gain awareness and understanding of the SPF in order to, "increase the chances that their efforts to design, implement, and sustain culturally competent and gender-sensitive programs are successful" (p. 58).

CITATION

Hoefer, R., & Chigbu, K. (2013). Planning to Succeed: A Case Study of the Implementation of the Strategic Prevention Framework. *Journal of Community Practice*, *21*(1-2), 43-61.

ARTICLE 2: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND PRACTICE IN DRUG ABUSE PREVENTION THROUGH NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANNING

SUMMARY

Despite significant advances in the science base for substance abuse prevention, as well as increased knowledge of predictive factors and effective interventions, the prevalence of illicit drug use among American adolescents and remains formidably high. Though prevention science research has demonstrated how prevention efforts can be effective, a gap remains between prevention research and practice. **Bridging this gap to produce meaningful reductions in the prevalence of adolescent substance abuse necessitates applying this expanding prevention science knowledge base to the development of strategic, science-based community prevention systems** (Arthur & Blitz, 2000, p. 241-243).

Prevention science provides a model for identifying prevention needs and developing strategic interventions in which effective community prevention programs require: information on the rate of initiation and prevalence of drug abuse; information on risk and protective factors; and coordinated, multi-component strategies focusing on risk and protective factors prioritized in the population. **This epidemiologically-based risk reduction model offers a useful framework for collecting data on a broad array of risk and protective factors, allowing the most prevalent factors to be identified and prioritized, leading to the selection of effective interventions and a resource focus on areas that display the highest risk and lowest protection** (p. 243-249). The goal of this needs assessment is four-part: first, to evaluate the match between needs and current prevention programming; second, to close gaps in prevention efforts; third, improve the overall prevention initiatives through accountability; fourth, align initiatives with federal and state funding mechanisms.

Maximizing the efficiency of resource utilization and allocation involves assessing a community's prevention resources through investigating the presence or absence of developmental assets among youth, surveying resources at the neighborhood level, and constructing a community assets map based on the surveys and an inventory of assets located in the area. Additionally, comprehensive community prevention interventions must give community members "ownership" over programs and involve them in the needs assessment and strategic planning processes. Science-based research suggests that successful interventions depend on the amount, content specificity, and timing of training provided as well as the clarity of project objectives (p. 249-251).

Prevention science has grown and improved in recent times, resulting in an advantageous model that "offers a basis for identifying prevention needs, resources to address those needs, and specific interventions that can reduce the probability of future drug use and other problem behaviors" (p. 251). Rather than instituting a one-size-fits-all approach, science-based best practices that have shown effectiveness in decreasing risk or enhancing protective factors can be matched to the particular needs of a specific community. Training, monitoring, technical assistance, and feedback can additionally be used to promote science-based prevention interventions, empowering communities and prevention planners to employ prevention science to develop strategic, effective, and comprehensive community-based prevention systems (p. 249-252).

CITATION

Arthur, M. W., & Blitz, C. (2000). Bridging the gap between science and practice in drug abuse prevention through needs assessment and strategic community planning. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *28*(3), 241-25.

ARTICLE 3: NEW HORIZONS IN ADULT EDUCATION & HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVES IN ADULT EDUCATION—ASSET MAPPING: A COURSE ASSIGNMENT AND COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

SUMMARY

Understanding a community's risks, needs, history, and protective factors is critical for developing effective substance abuse prevention initiatives, and current data is essential for an accurate picture of gaps, investments, past efforts, redundancies, capacities, and resources. **The idea of surveying assets, or asset mapping, as an element of a primary data collection process is a new strategy in community planning efforts.** Asset mapping identifies programs, infrastructure, associations, relationships, networks, services, community capacity, values, and related protective factors in a certain geographic area which can be harnessed to mitigate substance abuse risk factors. Organized as a survey, list, or topographic cartograph that includes a comprehensive inventory of resources, asset maps can serve as an indicator of progress in performance measurements, community service utilization, and program delivery (p. 125, 126).

Because of their tendency to jump into action before sound planning, new substance abuse prevention coalitions and students often neglect assessing needs, planning for new initiatives, and utilizing evidence-based programs. **To address this, university faculty teaching a substance abuse prevention course assigned their students the task of developing an asset map for their local area served by an off-campus substance abuse prevention coalition.** Students collected and tabulated data from structured interviews with off-campus community leaders, agency service providers, and business professionals, then combined their asset maps into a report shared with their local substance abuse prevention coalition toward planning new prevention initiatives. Designed to bridge theory and practice, the experiential learning process sought to build expertise in the field and positively impact the practice of substance abuse prevention through applying the skilled helper model and the prevention program planning model as theoretical frameworks for asset mapping (p. 126, 127).

By the assignment's end, asset mapping significantly deepened students' understanding of community assessment and planning, and how, "data collection can reveal critical population needs and resources that can be used to implement evidence-based interventions." (p. 127) Students learned to differentiate between traditional needs-based assessment and asset-based assessment and recognized the advantages of community data collection preceding the implementation of prevention services. **The experimental learning opportunity "provided a community context for students to better understand service delivery, problem-solving, and ways to apply theory to practice," resulting in rich data and beneficial experience to inform their future practice (p. 128).** Overall, the community assessment as a course assignment provided numerous benefits involving mutually beneficial outcomes for students, off-campus coalitions, and faculty (p. 125-128).

CITATION

Watkins, K. E., & Marsick, V. J. (2014). Adult education & human resource development: Overlapping and disparate fields. *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, *26*(1), 42-54.

ARTICLE 4: SOCIAL AND EPIDEMIOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF DRUG USE: A CASE STUDY OF RURAL YOUTH IN MISSOURI

SUMMARY

Substance use and abuse among American youth represents a significant and growing public health concern, with rural areas across the United States experiencing the greatest degree of illicit and non-illicit substance use rates. Yet while youth age 12-17 in rural areas present higher rates of drug use than their non-rural counterparts, they are less likely to have access to appropriate substance abuse treatment options. A shortage of preventive health services in these areas remains a major issue, with an underdeveloped workforce of health professionals less likely to be trained in prevention science. Due to this shortage of expertise, rural health professionals with experience in tertiary treatment are often reluctant to pursue developing and implementing primary prevention programs targeting youth. (Williams et al, 2011, p. 79-81).

Seeking to provide a guide to health educators and prevention professionals in such situations, researchers applied a social ecology model of health behavior in conducting a social and epidemiological needs assessment in two rural, southeast Missouri counties experiencing high rates of youth drug use. The coalition assembled a needs assessment team to "determine the quality of life factors as they related to risk and protective factors in substance abuse prevention" (p. 81). This team used a number of different research methodologies, including qualitative, quantitative, and proxy data. University faculty with expertise in research methods, substance abuse prevention, statistics, and behavior change paired with university students (who were all trained in data collection skills) to complete the needs assessment.

The study framed youth interviews through five social ecological levels of influence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public policy. When posed intrapersonal questions about attitudes and beliefs regarding drugs, youth frequently perceived a low risk of drug use due to the common presence of drug use by adults, and saw their futures limited to the careers of their parents within the boundaries of their rural community. On the interpersonal level, youth reported a lack of supervision and positive parental involvement in their lives, as well as negative role-modeling by adults. Youth additionally reported a lack of institutional resources as a major barrier to prevention and treatment and identified both a cultural acceptance of drug use and a lack of recreational opportunities and employment as community level factors. The primary policy influence reported was the ready availability of and

easy access to substances complemented by policy avoidance and law enforcement neglect (Williams et al, 2011, p. 80-83).

Results of the study indicate that youth drug use in rural areas is a critical and growing challenge impacting the health of individuals and communities. However, applying a social ecology model to conduct assessments in rural areas with high rates of drug use and limited resources allows health educators to identify key behavior constructs. **Study findings suggest that "the diagnosis of behavioral influences assists in the development of appropriate prevention and intervention strategies" (p. 84).**

CITATION

Williams Jr, R. D., Barnes, J. T., & Leoni, E. (2011). Social and Epidemiological Assessment of Drug Use: A Case Study of Rural Youth in MIssouri. *American Journal of Health Studies*, *26*(2).

CONCLUSION

Demographic data illuminates the severity of the challenges facing the prevention community, including the rates of drug and alcohol use by young people, especially those in rural populations. Compounding this challenge is the significant gap between research science and prevention efforts, illustrating the need for evidence-based community prevention efforts that accurately and meaningfully targets the community's needs while utilizing the full range of their prevention resources and assets.

The authors of the first article, Hoefer and Chigbu (2013), provided a first-ever "process-evaluation study" of how a prevention effort in Dallas, TX used the SPF to achieve lasting outcomes. For the purposes of this research review, we highlighted their efforts in the Needs Assessment stage. This study demonstrated that while the needs assessment was "laborious," utilizing the experience and expertise of gatekeepers was key to building the long-term trust and success of the project.

In the second article, Arthur and Blitz (2000), described the need to bridge the gap between science and practice by using a needs assessment. The authors noted that the purpose of this assessment is to collect data on a broad array of risk and protective factors, allowing the most

prevalent factors to be identified and prioritized, leading to the selection of effective interventions and a resource focus on areas that display the highest risk and lowest protection.

In the third article, Watkins and Marsick (2014) described the process of asset mapping, a community-centered model in which community programs, infrastructure, associations, relationships, networks, services, community capacity, values, and related protective factors in a certain geographic area which can be harnessed to mitigate substance abuse risk factors.

In the fourth article, Williams et al (2011) described their use of a social-ecological model to conduct a needs assessment in rural Missouri, which included university faculty, students, and experts in statistics, quantitative and qualitative methodologies, finding that their efforts resulted in a more accurate and valid assessment process.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Benjamin Gleason, PhD, is the Director of Applied Research for the Prospectus Group. He earned a PhD in Educational Psychology & Educational Technology from Michigan State University, researching how to best support communities of learners through educational technology. Before academia, Benjamin has worked in youth and adult-serving learning spaces for almost fifteen years, from designing youth-initiated community service projects and teaching high school in Richmond, California, to working as a university instructor in Guatemala. Benjamin is also a founder of the Prospectus Group.

Tanner Brooks received his MA in International Studies and Diplomacy from The University of London School of Oriental and African Studies, where his research focused on human rights and child soldiers. He has over a decade of experience in political activism, youth engagement, and education in various capacities including mentoring and tutoring teenage survivors of sex trafficking, teaching children with learning disabilities, and serving as a professor of culture and politics at the University of Manouba in Tunis, Tunisia.