HOW CAN WE KEEP IT GOING? KEY INGREDIENTS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

By
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Abstract

Highly regarded evidence-based programs aimed at improving youth and family well-being can fail easily when there is little or no planning for how to sustain the program past the first few initial implementations. Funding is often called out as the major reason for why programs do not last in communities. However, studies of program sustainability have shown that it is only one factor in program longevity, and perhaps not the most important factor. Four key ingredients for program sustainability are identified in this publication: program characteristics, organizational capacity and support, community capacity and support, and sustainability planning. The Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT), which is designed to assess and build capacity in these domains, is introduced. A case study illustrates how to use the PSAT effectively for long-term program planning and coordination. Youth and family program staff who are using evidence-based programs and want to assure they gain traction in their local communities can benefit from thinking about sustainability early and assessing and building capacity in these key ingredients throughout the program implementation process.

Introduction

The long-term enduring success and positive impact of community-based youth and family programs are largely dependent upon the capacity of local organizations to sustain them beyond initial seed grant funding. Program coordinators often lament lack of funding, pointing to it as the primary barrier to continuing a program. Although this is clearly a necessary piece of the sustainability puzzle, it is not sufficient on its own. The constant pressure and focus on securing additional funding can overshadow other key ingredients to successful program sustainability. Without specific guidance on balancing the search for funding with capacity building in these other key areas, initial investments are lost and many organizations struggle to achieve the sustained, positive impact on youth and family well-being they intended.

Program Sustainability: What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Many programs have been rigorously evaluated and deemed "evidence-based" because of their demonstrated success in improving youth and family well-being. They are widely promoted through registries of effective programs like the Blueprints Programs for Healthy Youth Development, and they are being widely adopted because of federal, state, and foundation grants, which require utilization of evidence-based programs. However, evidence-based programs are worthless if they cannot be consistently and effectively delivered in real-world settings where they are able to reach those youth and families that need them most.

One important component of effective youth and family program delivery is sustainability. Program sustainability is defined as the "continued use of program components and activities for the continued achievement of desirable program and population outcomes" (Scheirer and Dearing 2011). Because the vast majority of funding for youth and family programs is distributed through time-limited grants intended to "seed" effective programs, there is a critical need for youth and family professionals to focus on sustainability planning and capacity building early and often. Without specific guidance on how to do this, however, many programs are not sustained beyond the start-up grant dollars allocated to promote their adoption. As a result, too often, time-limited implementations result in time-limited impacts, which not only leave community needs unmet, but waste initial investments and can reduce the community's trust and support for future programs (Gruen et al. 2008). Fortunately, there is a growing research base highlighting the key ingredients to successful program sustainability, which can serve as guidance to youth and family professionals implementing these programs (Aarons et al. 2016; Cooper et al. 2015; Schell et al. 2013; Wiltsey Stirman et al. 2012; Welsh et al. 2016).

Key Ingredients for Program Sustainability

The process by which a program becomes successfully sustained is not linear, may look different from program to program, and is influenced by the broader social, policy, and financial context of the community (Scheirer 2013). However, sustainability research and theory point to several key factors, which may assist youth and family professionals as they plan for and implement their programs. The key ingredients for successful program sustainability fall into four major categories and are shown in Figure 1. They include (1) program characteristics, (2) organizational capacity and support, (3) community capacity and support, and (4) sustainability planning (Scheirer and Dearing 2011; Wiltsey Stirman et al. 2012).

Figure 1. The four key ingredients for successful program sustainability.

Program Characteristics

Research shows that programs that have the following characteristics are more likely to be sustained in the long run (Beidas et al. 2015; Hunter et al. 2015; Sanford DeRousie and Bierman 2012; Wiltsey Stirman et al. 2015).

- Flexibility and adaptability to different settings while maintaining effectiveness
- Less complexity and fewer resource requirements
- Alignment logistically and philosophically with the implementing organization's goals and routines

Organizational Capacity and Support

The organization leading the program's implementation plays a critical role in assuring its continued implementation and success (Aarons et al. 2016; Cooper et al. 2015; Schell et al. 2013). Organizational capacity is the infrastructure needed to successfully manage program implementation across time and locations. The support and resources required to make different types of programs successful may vary, but they generally include:

- Supportive leadership committed to the program's success
- Necessary human (i.e., staff) and financial resources to implement the program
- Effective organizational systems in place to support the program's implementation (e.g., program coordinator oversight, budget systems, evaluation protocols, recruitment protocols)

Research also shows that organizations that have the capacity to evaluate their program's impact, strategically plan for its future, and communicate its success to key stakeholders in their community are more likely to garner the support and resources needed to maintain long-term implementation (Cooper et al. 2015; Greenberg et al. 2015; Tabak et al. 2016; Wiltsey Stirman et al. 2015).

Community Capacity and Support

Organizations and their programs are implemented within a broader social, political, and economic context. Establishing relationships with other organizations and community leaders whose goals align with yours is key to cultivating program champions. These champions can create a supportive climate—through policies, resources and advocacy—that increases the capacity for program sustainability and for funding stability (Aarons et al. 2016; Cooper et al. 2015; Green et al. 2016; Tabak et al. 2016; Welsh et al. 2016).

Sustainability Planning

Program planning is usually done intensely as a program is being introduced to a community. Initial partnerships are established and a great deal of energy is put into building the capacity to offer and complete programs in targeted communities. Success can be dramatic and instantaneous—the program is well received by the target community and participation is strong in the first implementation. However,

success can also be short-lived if no effort is made to promote the program's sustainability. If program organizers can thoughtfully craft and follow a sustainability plan, there is a much greater chance of long-term success. Two tools emerge as particularly useful in sustainability planning: an assessment plan and an action plan. Both tools should be developed with a variety of stakeholders and should reflect the community in which the program operates. These tools could focus narrowly on a particular community or sector of the population that the program is trying to reach or focus more broadly on the community at large (defined by the funder and sponsor).

The Program Sustainability Assessment Tool (PSAT) is a good starting place (Luke et al. 2014). The PSAT is a research-based tool designed to assess, plan, and build capacity in the key program, organizational, and community ingredients needed to sustain a program. Specifically, it measures the following factors.

- **Program adaptation** includes using empirical and experiential information to adapt the program to fit changing contexts and conditions in order to assure its ongoing success and impact.

- **Organizational capacity** includes having the organizational support and resources necessary to successfully manage and implement your program.

- **Program evaluation** includes having the ability to collect, interpret, and use data to assess your program's impact, and plan and advocate for its future and ongoing success.

- **Communication** includes using specific strategies to increase awareness of your program's needs and to demonstrate its success to key stakeholders and the broader community.

Program Sustainability Planning Resources

✓ The Program Sustainability and Assessment Tool (PSAT) https://sustaintool.org/assess

✓ PSAT Action Plan Templates https://sustaintool.org/plan

✓ PSAT Capacity Building Resources https://sustaintool.org/resources

✓ Sustainability Toolkit for Prevention Using Getting to Outcomes http://www.jrsa.org/njjec/tk-sustainability-sp/ sustainabilitytoolkitgettingtooutcomes.pdf

- **Strategic planning** includes systematically and proactively developing a plan to guide your program's long-term outcomes and future goals.

- **Environmental support** includes connecting with and cultivating champions inside and outside your organization who are committed to advocating for your program.

- **Partnerships** include developing strong relationships between your program and the organizations, leaders, and community members that play a role in supporting its success.

- **Funding stability** includes establishing stable financial support for your program.

Assessing and Building Sustainability Capacity: A Case Study

Calhoun et al. (2014) recommend a three-step process to assess and plan for building capacity in these key areas. These steps are outlined in Figure 2 and described within the context of one example below.
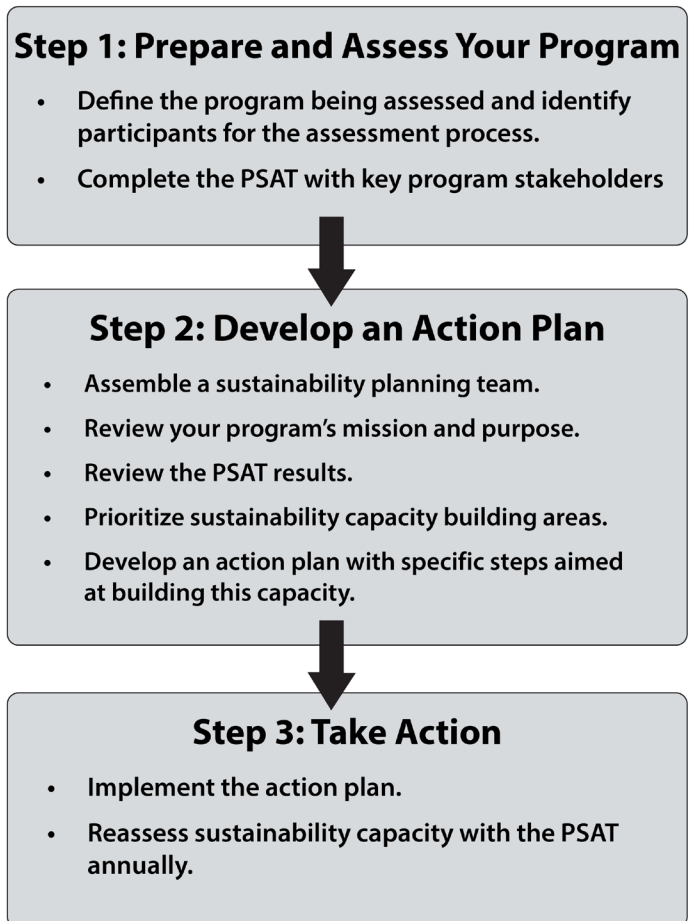
Step 1: Prepare and Assess Your Program

- Define the program being assessed and identify participants for the assessment process.
- Complete the PSAT with key program stakeholders

Step 2: Develop an Action Plan

- Assemble a sustainability planning team.
- Review your program's mission and purpose.
- Review the PSAT results.
- Prioritize sustainability capacity building areas.
- Develop an action plan with specific steps aimed at building this capacity.

Step 3: Take Action

- Implement the action plan.
- Reassess sustainability capacity with the PSAT annually.

Figure 2. The three-step process for assessing and building sustainability capacity.

Step 1: Prepare and Assess Your Program

The first step is to prepare and assess the targeted program. It is important to be very clear about the focus of the assessment. The program scope for the assessment should be defined before beginning the process. Program advocates, funders, developers, coordinators, and volunteers may all be involved in the assessment process if desired. For example, if one community within a larger county structure is experiencing mixed results in program recruitment (a key element to sustainability success), then it makes good sense to use that community as the focus of the PSAT. One might also choose to generalize the PSAT to all the areas in which the program exists to have a point of comparison.

As one example, imagine that an evidence-based program for parents and youth operates in middle schools throughout Sunshine County. Rocky Road School District has two middle schools and both have a history of offering the program. The program sponsor has recently had difficulty recruiting families to the program in one of Rocky Road School District schools, and in the other Rocky Road School District school the program is very successful and has been sustained for several years. There may be some guesses about why these differences exist, but if the goal is to have the program succeed in both schools within the district, using the PSAT will provide objective information about the root of these differences. In this case, it made sense for program staff to complete two program assessments: one that focused on the programs being implemented in schools in Rocky Road School District and one that included programs being implemented in all the school districts in Sunshine County where the program operated (six districts).

Step 2: Develop Action Plan

The second step in this process is to use information from the assessment to inform an action plan. In reviewing the two completed assessments for this example, differences were found in three domains: communication, partnerships, and organizational capacity. The areas of difference between Rocky Road School District and the overall Sunshine County program were as follows: Rocky Road School District had better communication processes than the overall Sunshine County program thanks to the work of a local organizer. The local organizer, however, was not connected to the school district, and the partnerships with school staff were much less established than those with other districts in the overall Sunshine County program. The organizational structure rating in the assessment was also weaker for Rocky Road School District than for Sunshine County because there was less engagement by Rocky Road School District staff in the program than was typical for the same programs in other

school districts in Sunshine County.

Step 3: Take Action

The final step in this process is to use the action plan to guide specific strategies aimed at building sustainability capacity in the prioritized areas. For this example, the program management team has begun to meet with key partners within the Rocky Road School District to plan for program implementations in the next school year. The PSAT is being shared with key personnel as a way to address some of the issues that led to differences in the program recruitment at the two district middle schools. It is hoped that a plan will be developed that will ease the program implementation issues in Rocky Road School District. In addition, plans are being made to initiate social media as a program communication tool in the upcoming school year. The program sponsor's technical coordinator is now involved in planning how to best engage with social media and how to prepare participants, staff, and partners to use social media. The program coordinators are also exploring how to evaluate the impact of social media on program participation. A logic model will be developed that will form the backbone of the latter plan. The logic model will describe the current assets of the community and the program implementing agency, the inputs that each will provide the program, the products or actions (outputs) that will be used, and the hoped-for outcomes, both short- and medium-term changes in engagement for the participants and the stakeholders of the program.

Conclusion

Sustaining program activities and participant outcomes is central to the mission of most community-based organizations working to improve the well-being of youth and families. This important job largely falls on the coordinators charged with facilitating the implementation of these programs, and yet few have specific training in how to navigate these challenging and complex waters. Fortunately, recent research on the program, organizational, and community factors supportive of sustainability, and the resultant research-based tools, provide much-needed guidance on how to assess, plan for, and build sustainability capacity. By proactively improving the capacity to sustain evidence-based programs, youth and family professionals move one step closer to their ultimate goal of improving the lives of the children and families with whom they work.

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