

# So, You Need to Justify Your Existing ABC Program

*(or Lobby for a New One)*

by Jean Terry Walsh and Lee Gillis

**A**lthough, unlike some other treatment modalities, there is not a plethora of research-oriented information on adventure-based counseling, getting the information that you (your funders, your boss, your board of directors...) want is probably not as hard as it seems. The beginning point is not a panic-driven trip to the local university library or a night in front of your computer staring blankly at ERIC on line. The beginning is actually asking lots of questions about what you and the folks you work with and/or who fund you want to know.

## What Do You Need?

Do you need to know if the program you already have is working?

Do you need to propose a program evaluation for the program you're planning?

Do you need to know if the ABC program you propose is going to be effective based on current research?

The first two questions, although slightly different, can be lumped together (remember this article is intended to be a brief overview). At the essence of your yes to either question is your need to develop a meaningful evaluation plan. To develop such a plan, you need to be clear about 1) the goals of your current or proposed program, 2) the goals of your evaluation and 3) the resources available to you to complete this evaluation.

Let's flesh out these three questions.

1) What are the program goals? This should be fairly easy to answer. A goal that can be used for evalua-

tion needs to address only one issue and needs to have the potential to be achievable. Your evaluation should be built entirely around your goals. Examples of some goals we have for Choices, our substance abuse treatment program for adjudicated youth, are:

Progress Goal: To serve 75 adjudicated youth with demonstrated substance abuse problems annually.

Outcome Goal: To significantly enhance the self-esteem of participating youth.

2) What are the goals of your evaluation? Do you simply want some anecdotal information demonstrating that what you do meets your program's goals? (Another way to think about this question is: Will your clients' success stories amply demonstrate this?) Do you need some numerical/statistical information about your clients and their progress? Do you need some numerical/statistical information about your clients and their progress in comparison to a similar group? Can you reasonably expect to see changes in outcomes you're planning to measure? (This is key: Can youth who've been retained become A students in a year? Not likely; however, can youth who've been retained significantly increase their attendance rate in a year? In your outstanding program, this is likely to happen.)

For Choices, we answer the first three to various degrees, keeping the final question integral to our entire plan. We collect success stories because having these available helps practitioners better understand/picture what Choices does and the impact it has. We collect lots of

demographic and pre/post measurements that allow us to measure several goals, including the two described above. Finally, we compare rates of recidivism for youth who have been in Choices to those for youth who have spent time in a locked facility in the state of Georgia. We know, the state of Georgia knows and CSAT, who used to fund Choices, knows that this comparison is not without some flaws; however, it tells all three of us that youth who participate in Choices are much less likely to reoffend than youth who have been remanded to "lock-up," the alternative to participating in Choices.

3) What are the resources available to you for your evaluation? You can afford to hire an outside evaluator or you have a knowledgeable person in-house for whom an appropriate amount of time is available. Lucky you, read this article and be involved, but pass the design and implementation off to them. In our experience, this is where many programs run into trouble. They have solid evaluation plans that examine their goals, but they have neither the time, the staff, the expertise nor the money necessary to implement their plan. It is always better to plan something that you can deliver. To deliver more than you planned is just icing on the cake. So, if what people need or want from your evaluation doesn't match your resources, you'll want to reconcile this either way.

After you've answered these questions, design away. We advise people to look for simple answers. For example, your year-long, school-

based ABC program seeks to improve academic achievement. The school you're working with retains the academic records of your participants. Assure the school of confidentiality and ask them to allow you access to GPAs. You could compare the years prior to, during and after participation in a repeated measure analysis, etc. Comparison groups make your evaluation much more complex, so we would recommend steering clear unless you have ample resources or are comparing your participants to readily available numbers, perhaps with some caveats, as we compare recidivism for Choices.

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Additionally, if you choose to use some standard psychological measurements, please keep in mind: 1) Their duration—does your program allow you the time you need to administer these? and 2) Is there someone on your staff who is qualified to administer such an assessment? (Typically, the folks who sell such instruments will not do so without the name of someone who has a graduate degree in social science.)

### How Can PA Help You Design an Evaluation Plan?

Within the confines of our frequently demanding schedules, we are happy to give our clients thoughts and ideas about their evaluation plans. We realize that some of our publications lead readers to believe that we have a Student Attitude Inventory, the Tennessee Self Concept Scale or the Piers Harris Children's Self Concept Scale that we can pop in the mail for you. Sorry, we can't and if we did we'd have some lawyers after us. The Tennessee and the Piers Harris are

available from Western Psychological Services (1-800-222-2670). We do share some of our internal evaluation reports and reprints of conference presentations, journal articles and book chapters, but these do not contain any instruments to evaluate your program.

### Current Research

So you answered yes to question 3: Do you need to know if the ABC program you propose is going to be effective based on current research? What is difficult is that there are very few (if any) well-constructed re-

search articles that meet scientific criteria for random selection of participants and the use of treatment and control groups demonstrating the use of ABC to be more powerful than the use of a traditional approach to counseling. There are very few studies within

the broad field of counseling or psychotherapy which show such definitive results.

What's a customer to do? What's a customer to say? For the past several years, we have shared an annotated bibliography of information available through most computer-assisted searches that highlights information about the wide field of adventure programming. These studies, mostly evaluation studies, do show the impact of adventure programming on the self-concepts, loci of control and behaviors of students or clients participating in adventure programming—much like the evaluation in the original *Islands of Healing* (Cason & Gillis, 1993). Our typical next step is to say, this has demonstrated to us that ABC enhances self-esteem and all this reliable research demonstrates that enhanced self esteem is likely to diminish the risk of (whatever appropriate risk factors you are fighting). The bottom line is that research studies on ABC programming have not made it into the published literature (a challenge for you,

perhaps?). Most of the work done exists in the form of theses and dissertations that never make it to publication. Several noteworthy documents in the public domain (ERIC system) and dissertations are highlighted in the appendix of this art for you the reader to acquire and use as you see fit.

The following is an extremely brief summary of our experience as evaluators. We hope this will help/inform all our readers who answer yes to any of the three questions initially posed. Our experience at Project Adventure's Covington office with Legacy, the 10-month (minimum) program for adjudicated juvenile sex offenders; Choices, the 16-week drug treatment program for adjudicated adolescents; and Challenge, the six-week program for adjudicated youth is that oftentimes the standard measures of change reported in the literature for self-esteem and locus of control do not hold out when we measure only one group at a time. (Gillis & Simpson, 1991, 1994; Gillis et al., 1995). We hypothesize that this lack of statistical change is due to the small numbers of youth that are in our group from week to week. In contrast, a look at the well over 150 youth who participated in Challenge over several years demonstrates improvement in self-concept that are statistically significant. (Statistical significance is more easily obtained when looking at large numbers of clients.) Our initial look at the first year of Legacy shows that our clients are doing treatment since their scores reflect the anxiety and depression that logically result from a more honest look at themselves and their past behavior (Simpson & Gillis, 1997). Our clients who have been at Legacy the longest show improvements in both self-esteem and in clinical measures (MMPI-Adolescent version) that are consistent with our treatment objectives. Still, we have no control group and can only offer our granting agency indicators of this change coupled with the more important information that the vast majority of our clients who complete our programs do not engage in the behavior for which they were referred to us.

Low recidivism is the most important point to those who grant us money and entrust us to do good work. We are unable to say if it is the adventure portions of our work that achieve these results or if it is our philosophy of group work or if it is our caring and committed staff; we are not in an environment that allows us to separate these variables into specific categories that can be scrutinized scientifically. We know that we do good work; our data shows us that we do and, most importantly, our clients' behavior, once they return to the environments from which they came, demonstrates that they have transferred what occurred in Challenge or Choices or Legacy into more socially appropriate behaviors.

Research with groups as well as individuals in counseling environments has begun to value process research as a method of finding out what is happening during the time clients are involved in groups. Using process research, evaluators and/or program staff attempt to measure the day-to-day or week-to-week changes that happen in groups. These measures can be both qualitative and quantitative. At PA, we have often used quantitative measures of how group members feel that they themselves and their peers are working on their goals. Historically we have found that the average score of the peers' view of an individual group member coincides with the staff's determination of how that group member is performing in the program. This is a simple and cost-effective method of taking the pulse

of the group. Using a sheet of paper with each group member's name typed on it, we ask group members to rate everyone (including him- or herself) on how well they are working on their goals for the week (or day). Using a calculator, we determine the average peer score for each group member and compare this to the score he or she gave themselves. The results are often shared with the group in either individual sessions or as part of a larger discussion of how the group sees each individual. Such process measures taken from the time we give our pre-test to the time we give our post-test have helped us make more sense out of the outcome data (pre-post) we have received. We challenge you to investigate ways to gather information on your groups from day to day or from week to week in nonthreatening and useful

ways. Such simple measures can also apply to information that many schools and community agencies already have on hand.

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"Look first within your own front yard" is some of the advice Glenda the good witch gave Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* right before she asked Dorothy to tap her heels together. It can be advice worth taking.



**Jean Terry Walsh, M.A.** is Assistant Director of Research and Development for Project Adventure. Using her background in social psychology, she has helped to design, monitor and evaluate several innovative programs for PA.

**Lee Gillis, Ph.D.,** is a member of the therapeutic market team for Project Adventure, where he wears hats with titles like consulting psychologist, writer and researcher. He has worked with the direct service programs of Project Adventure since 1990. In his other life, he is a professor of psychology at Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, GA.

## References

- Please also see this web address, <http://www.faculty.de.gcsu.edu/~lgillis/pa.htm>, where a couple of our articles are posted.
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## Appendix

- Bandoroff, Scott (1989). *Wilderness-Adventure Therapy for Delinquent and Pre-Delinquent Youth: A Review of the Literature*. ERIC No.: ED377428.