

**North Carolina A&T State University and University of Georgia Partnership
UGA-CFR/NIMH Center Grant Research Initiative
Strong African American Families Implementation Project**

**NC A&T FINAL REPORT
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Introduction

The primary purpose of the partnership between North Carolina A&T State University (NC A&T) and the University of Georgia's (UGA) Prevention Programs for Rural African American Families Center Grant was to test the feasibility of a prevention program called the *Strong African American Families Program* (SAAF). The SAAF Program was developed in response to the need for a family-based preventive intervention specifically for African American families living in rural communities. The test of feasibility involved implementing the SAAF Program under a more naturalistic service delivery model. Cooperative Extension Services in North Carolina was selected as the service delivery model to implement and evaluate the SAAF Program in a more naturalistic manner.

The partnership between NC A&T and UGA was very timely as it facilitated the prevention of North Carolina African American youth's participation in high-risk behaviors leading to negative outcomes and it helped families to stay connected to their youth. Moreover, the partnership facilitated the increase of the community's acceptance of the principles and ideals of the SAAF Program as it was diffused into communities under a familiar service delivery model, Cooperative Extension Services.

Description of University and Community Engagement

A diffusion model (combination of regular and intermittent direct contact) served as a vehicle to transfer information between NC A&T and UGA personnel. This transfer of information occurred at three levels and was a key component as it served as the cornerstone for methodologies implemented in the partnership. The partnership included personnel operating at the following three levels: 1) an implementation-level team, 2) an intermediate-level coordination team, and 3) a university-level prevention team. The sections to follow describe the composition and engagement of each team.

The **implementation team** (grassroots partners) included NC A&T project coordinator, NC A&T Cooperative Extension Services agents from two rural North Carolina communities, Hoke and Robeson Counties, and a community liaison system. This team collaborated with community liaisons to recruit families from the two rural North Carolina communities to participate in the feasibility study. County cooperative extension agents and community liaisons used engagement-promoting processes such as telephone calls, individual correspondences, and personal contacts with families to encourage participation in and attendance to SAAF Program sessions.

The **intermediate team** consisted of prevention coordinators from NC A&T, UGA, and the county cooperative extension agents. The prevention coordinators were responsible for training

the implementation team, giving technical assistance, and monitoring the quality of implementation of the SAAF Program. Specifically, the prevention coordinators from UGA shared information about several core areas, including recruitment, retention, data collection, and data management.

The **university team** consisted of prevention researchers at NC A&T and UGA, Cooperative Extension director at NC A&T, and members of the UGA training, implementation, and statistical groups. This team gave technical support to the intermediate and implementation team, provided administrative oversight, designed and directed data collection protocols, and prepared and disseminated scientific reports.

Frequent, responsive communication occurred at all three personnel levels. The frequency of communication was highly necessary for the overall success of the partnership, including the test of feasibility. Initially, all three personnel teams participated in on-site meetings in the two rural counties to discuss the overall process, management, concerns, and benefits of the SAAF and feasibility study. Throughout the partnership of planning, training, implementation, and post-implementation, the university team participated in bi-weekly teleconferences and electronic communications to discuss and provide feedback (i.e., progress, issues, concerns, and resolutions) on the feasibility of using the protocols through Cooperative Extension Services. Quick technical or problem-solving assistance were provided when needed. Likewise, weekly to bi-weekly engagement such as telephone calls and on-site visits to cooperative extension agents were conducted by the NC A&T project coordinator.

Goal and Objectives of SAAF Implementation through Cooperative Extension Services

The goal of the partnership between NC A&T and UGA was to work collaboratively to develop and test the feasibility for delivering family-centered interventions to rural African American families through Cooperative Extension Services. To accomplish this goal, the following objectives guided the partnership:

- 1) recruit 40 rural African American families in North Carolina;
- 2) collect pre-test and post-test data from youth and caregivers in a control and intervention prevention group;
- 3) obtain data on the quality and fidelity of the SAAF Program through a naturalistic service delivery model; and
- 4) examine data for trends.

Preparation for Implementing the SAAF Program

A. Establishing research/prevention intervention infrastructure.

To manage and administrate the overall operation of the feasibility of implementing the SAAF Program through Cooperative Extension Services in North Carolina, a SAAF research office was set-up in C.H. Moore Research Station on the campus of NC A&T. A part-time program assistant was hired to perform all clerical duties, including the oversight and management of the research office and support the work of the implementation team. Additionally, a processing

assistant was hired to support the program assistant and perform duties as assigned by the implementation team.

The search for a project coordinator involved identifying an individual who not only understood the implementation of Cooperative Extension Services in North Carolina, but who also had experience in doing so. A project coordinator with these qualities was identified, recruited, and hired. The project coordinator provided on-site oversight and guidance to county extension agents in order to ensure the successful implementation of the SAAF program, including pre- and post-test data collection protocols in the two rural North Carolina counties. The project coordinator was responsible for working closely with county agents and community liaisons in both rural counties in the recruitment of African American families and educational facilitators for participation in the SAAF Program. Additionally, the project coordinator was also responsible for recruiting, training, and supervising field interviewers in close consultation with the university team at NC A&T.

B. Recruitment and training of field interviewers and educational facilitators.

Field interviewers were recruited by two primary methods. First, a position announcement for field interviewers was developed and distributed by mail to North Carolina universities and community colleges with departments of human development and family studies and early childhood education programs and/or research institutes. Second, the position announcement was hand-delivered to individuals who may have been interested in participating in the project. Through the aforementioned recruitment methods, eight (8) African American field interviewers (7 females and 1 male) were identified. However, five (5) field interviewers (all females) remained constantly active and participated in the project.

Prior to data collection, a three-day field interviewer training was conducted on the campus of NC A&T. This training was conducted by the NC A&T intermediate team and attended by two UGA partners for support and assistance as needed. The field interviewer training consisted of, but was not limited to, the following components: overview of the project, roles and responsibilities of the field interviewer, interview process, technology of interviewing, cultural sensitivity in interviewing, policies and procedures of human subjects research, and completion of human subjects certification. Field interviewers successfully completed the human subjects assessment with a passing level of 80%-100%. Approximately mid-way of data collection, field-interviewers were “refreshed” of the entire field interviewing process. This mid-point training was individually conducted with each field interviewer by the project coordinator in both rural North Carolina counties.

To identify and recruit educational facilitators, the project coordinator worked closely with the county extension agents in both rural counties. Given the active presence of Cooperative Extension Services in the two rural counties, the identification and recruitment of community volunteers as educational facilitators was easily successful. Several seasoned community volunteers (approximately 12-15) agreed to serve as educational facilitators and/or alternative educational facilitators of the SAAF Program in their respective community. The educational facilitators participated in a two-day training facilitated by the UGA project coordinator and support staff. NC A&T team members were also in attendance of the training to provide training support as needed. This training process involved the use of a protocol developed to train

educational facilitators to implement the seven sessions of the SAAF Program. Specifically, the protocol involved direct instruction, guided mastery modeling, role playing, and partial program implementations followed by corrective feedback. Each component was mastered before new components were introduced.

Description of Data Collection Procedures for Pre and Post-test

Data collection in both Hoke and Robeson counties was scheduled at two time periods, pre-test and post-test. There was a total of 32 families (16 families in Hoke County and 16 families in Robeson County) who parent an 11 year-old youth. Data at both time periods was collected in the homes of families by trained field interviewers via computer-assisted interviews with primary caregivers and youths.

Following pre-test data collection, a convenience sample of Hoke County families (treatment group) were selected to participate in the seven-week SAAF Program conducted by community volunteers (educational facilitators) and videotaped by county extension agents. During this time, Robeson County families (controlled group) received literature about adolescent development, communication, youth management, resistance to peer pressure, and avoidance of substance use.

Post-test data collection began approximately four months after the SAAF Program was completed. Post-test data collection consisted of re-interviewing families following training (treatment group) and receipt of literature (controlled group). Concentrated efforts were made to re-interview all 32 families in both counties. However, family structure changes and challenges (e.g., military deployment of primary caregivers, target youth living with extended family members, families moved out of participating county, etc.) created some attrition. Some families discontinued participation in the project as a result of these changes and challenges. The final count of families re-interviewed during post-test data collection was 13 in Hoke County and 7 in Robeson County.

Implementation of the SAAF Program

The implementation of the SAAF Program involved a seven-week series of primary caregivers and their youth in separate, concurrent sessions followed by family group sessions. To determine the feasibility of implementing the SAAF Program through Cooperative Extension, Services, the following indicators were examined: 1) attendance of families, 2) fidelity assessment scores of the intervention implementation, and 3) participants' reports of the intervention's effectiveness.

Attendance of families

Approximately six (6) Hoke County families actively participated and attended the SAAF Program. Attendance was recorded at each session. The apparent low attendance rate of families to the SAAF Program was due to other community activities with a long-standing record of attendance by community members.

Fidelity Assessment of SAAF Implementation

The seven-week SAAF Program conducted by community volunteers (educational facilitators) was videotaped by two county extension agents in order to conduct a fidelity assessment of SAAF implementation. The county extension agents were trained to monitor and observe the implementation fidelity and confirmed that fidelity was achieved. The table below summarizes the fidelity assessment.

Fidelity Assessment Summary

SAAF Program Session	Observer	Fidelity Score
Family Session 3	County Agent #1	100
Youth Session 4	County Agent #2	75*
Parent Session 4	County Agent #1	90
Youth Session 4	County Agent #1	91*
Family Session 5	County Agent #2	83
Parent Session 6	County Agent #2	82
Youth Session 7	County Agent #2	100

The educational facilitators who implemented the SAAF Program were seasoned trainers in the community. Thus, no corrective feedback regarding the implementation of SAAF was needed.

Summary of Findings Emerging from Focus Groups

Focus group sessions with various participants (cooperative extension agents, field interviewers, and SAAF educational facilitators) were conducted to obtain qualitative data on the partnering process, as well as the collection of information on the merits of the SAAF Program, its substantive value to the larger community, and ways to enhance the program. An independent consultant was hired to facilitate focus group sessions. The NC A&T intermediate and university teams attended each focus group session as observers. No feedback was given.

Three focus group sessions were held with each session consisting of a different group of participants. The focus group sessions included:

- Educational facilitators: four (4) main facilitators provided input on the success of SAAF implementation;
- Cooperative Extension Agents: cooperative extension staff from Hoke and Robeson counties participated in the same session and provided feedback on partnership process;
- Field Interviewers: five (5) main field interviewers provided feedback relative to their experiences in pre and post-test data collection in the home of families.

The consultant facilitated each focus group with a set of partnership questions, other questions specific for each group, and SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) analyses.

The partnership itself was discussed through the following set of questions (*supplemental questions were developed to support understanding*):

- 1) What issues arose concerning the partnership and how were they resolved?
- 2) Were there any issues that could not be resolved? What effects did the lack of resolution engender? (*What happened because the issues were not resolved?*)
- 3) What changes were made to enhance the partnership? (*What changes were made to make the partnership better?*)
- 4) What type of communication characterized the partnership? What was its nature and frequency? (*In what ways did you communicate with partners involved in the SAAF project? How often did you communicate? What happened?*)
- 5) Was the partnership a viable mechanism for a more widespread dissemination of the Strong African American Families program? (*Was the partnership a good means to get people involved in the SAAF Program?*)
- 6) What did the partners learn about directions for future dissemination efforts? (*Was there anything that happened which would benefit us the next time we offer the SAAF Program?*)

Other questions specifically for the field interviewers included the following:

- 1) How did your participation in training help you conduct family interviews?
- 2) Was there something that you did not get from training which would have helped you conduct family interviews?
- 3) What parts of the scheduling process worked well?
- 4) What changes need to be made to the scheduling process?
- 5) What can be done to improve communication the next time the project is implemented?
- 6) What made your job as a field interviewer easy?
- 7) What made your job as an interviewer difficult?
- 8) What benefits (if any) did you gain from participating in this project?

Other questions specifically for the educational facilitators included the following:

- 1) What did you especially like about the program?
- 2) What did you dislike about the program?
- 3) How has being involved in this program helped you personally or professionally?
- 4) How did your participation in training help you conduct the sessions in the SAAF curriculum?
- 5) Was there something that you did not get from training which would have helped you to do a better job leading the sessions in the SAAF curriculum?

Other questions specifically for the cooperative extension agents included the following:

- 1) How did you recruit adolescents and their parents?
- 2) How did you recruit volunteer group leaders for the SAAF curriculum?
- 3) What benefits (if any) did you gain from participating in this program?
- 4) What would you like to see happen the next time the SAAF curriculum is implemented in your county?

A SWOT analysis was conducted at the end of each focus group session. This analysis involved participants writing comments for each area (i.e., strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) on post-it note sheets and posting each comment on large chart paper individually label with each posted on the walls. This process was followed by the consultant reading each comment and facilitating a discussion.

The consultant summarized responses to each question and SWOT analysis per focus group session and submitted a report to the NC A&T intermediate and university team. The NC A&T team submitted the report to the UGA team. Refer to the attached summary report for a detailed review of findings that emerged from the focus group sessions. (*Note: UGA attach a copy of the focus group report*).

Research Findings from Pilot Testing of SAAF (*Note: UGA insert a summary of findings.*)

Lessons Learned

The NC A&T team learned several lessons resulting from the partnership with UGA. These lessons are discussed in the section below by the following topics: multi-level organizational structure, resources, communication, and test of feasibility.

Multi-level Organizational Structure

The primary purpose of the partnership between NC A&T and UGA was to test the feasibility of the SAAF Program in a “real-world” setting. The use of a multi-level organizational structure (i.e., implementation team, intermediate team, and university team) served as an effective way to exchange information among the partners. However, this structure also presented some challenges when using the organizational structure of partnerships to move a family centered intervention program from research to “real-world” settings. Some of the challenges included: (a) differing resources used in research versus “real-world” settings, (b) communication issues, (c) management and monitoring, (d) misalignment of thought patterns, and (e) issues associated with moving from a more research focused project to one focused primarily on intervention.

Resources

Resources used during the research phase of the project were different from the resources typically available during "real-world" implementation. Given that the feasibility test used Cooperative Extension (CE) as the delivery system in the “real-world”, it was important to note that CE generally does not pay facilitators or group leaders nor families or youth for participation in CE programs. Instead, for program delivery, CE relies heavily on trained volunteers and the internal self-motivation of families and youth to participate in CE programs. However, volunteers must be recruited and they must receive training and support for executing their volunteer jobs. Recruitment, training, and maintaining volunteers require time, effort, and a commitment to serve the local community.

Approximately 12-15 volunteers from the two North Carolina rural counties were eager to serve as facilitators or group leaders for the SAAF Program because they simply wanted to do whatever they could “to help our youth.” Likewise, families and their youth in the two rural counties typically participate in CE programs without monetary incentive because they really

want a better quality of life. Overall, available resources afforded by the research phase of the project may actually prove to negatively impact future CE programs in the rural counties as monetary incentives for family and/or youth participation will not be provided.

Communication

In any relationship and especially in a multi-level partnership involving many people, efficient effective communication is crucial to the success of the project. When there is distance between partners, keeping the lines of communication open can be difficult. In one sense, the NC A&T and UGA partners were fortunate to have technology, which made it easier to stay connected from a distance. However, the use of technology was *a double edge sword – both a blessing and a curse/ both helped and hindered*. For example, using e-mails made it easier to stay in touch; however, frequent requests via e-mail messages requiring an immediate response presented problems for partners who have other responsibilities and priorities. At other times, technology enabled partners to send and receive important information quickly. The process of communication contributed to the need to adjust and readjust timelines.

Test of Feasibility

The primary purpose of the partnership was to test the feasibility of a model (SAAF) for delivering family-centered interventions to rural African-Americans. However, at times there was an apparent focus of the partnership more on the science of research rather than on the test of the intervention through CE. In a final reflection of the partnership, it was concluded that close management or monitoring of the partnership process hindered “real-world” implementation of the SAAF Program. CE has a long history of delivering curricula through volunteers in community settings. The truest test of the SAAF Program would be to provide the curriculum/intervention sessions to CE field staff leaving decisions at the field level about how to best implement given the county situations as best known by the field staff who live and work in the county/area. When the process of implementation is being closely managed and monitored from a distance, it is difficult to get buy-in from CE field staff at the local level who must play a *key role/take major responsibility* for what happens. Allowing a more localized implementation, helps ensure buy-in, ownership, and enthusiasm for the project or activity.

Conclusion

NC A&T partnership with UGA brought many positive benefits to the table such as their long and successful history of working with rural African-Americans, their successful work in recruiting and retaining African-American participants, and their work in putting research based information in practical use to benefit ordinary citizens. In spite of the lessons learned, the valuable use of the SAAF Program once released for free use in the “real-world” by programs like CE will far out weigh any challenges endured.