Building Capacity for Evaluating Outcomes in Therapeutic Riding Using GAS and a Collaborative Approach: A Summary of the Lessons Learned

March 2015 **TRAIN Project Consultant: Cathy Smith Hybels, Ph.D.**

Background

The Therapeutic Riding Assessment of Impact Network (TRAIN) originated in 2014, its genesis motivated by four New England-based therapeutic riding center (TRC) members' desires to work together to implement and effectively utilize goal attainment scaling (GAS) to measure participant progress on skills taught in therapeutic riding (TR). The goals of TRAIN are to:

- provide greater accountability to stakeholders regarding the outcomes of therapeutic riding programs
- accelerate TR industry progress in outcomes evaluation by raising awareness, using common methods, building capacity, and sharing results
- build on 3 previous pilot studies conducted at High Horses that demonstrated the utility of the GAS method for quantifying TR outcomes.

Each of the 4 TRAIN member centers agreed to:

- adopt common terminology and a standardized session report for tracking participant progress
- support TR instructors and volunteers at their center during implementation and use of GAS for measuring participant progress towards individualized goals in horsemanship skills and supporting skill areas
- adopt a continuous improvement perspective towards assessing program impact and building OE capacity at their site
- provide feedback on the process
- share outcomes data and results with the other centers.

To support the member centers, TRAIN provided:

- some compensation to offset project-related expenses
- an introduction to the GAS method and materials
- quarterly meetings for discussion of progress and results
- GAS forms, GAS procedures, and technical support
- Data analysis and reporting of results
- materials to facilitate project communications.

Links to Previous Project Reports and Additional Project Information:

2012 High Horses GAS Pilot Study 1

2013 High Horses GAS Pilot Study 2

2013 High Horses GAS Study 3

2014 TRAIN Interim Report on Building Capacity for Evaluating Outcomes In Therapeutic Riding

Key Questions

Designed as a study of the feasibility of the collaborative approach to outcomes evaluation in TR, this investigation was essentially a "dress rehearsal" of procedures. The study's purpose was to identify factors that may potentially hinder the likelihood of future success should TRAIN choose to expand. As such, and consistent with the purpose of feasibility studies, the focus was *not* on producing meaningful estimates of the impact of TR programs on participants, but on the functionality of the collaborative process and procedures. A list of key study questions appears in Table One below.

Table One: Feasibility Study Issues

Topic	Key Questions
Process	• What procedural issues emerged? • What worked well? • What didn't?
Resources	• Were there adequate resources? • How might resources be better allocated?
Management	• Are the procedures for managing data collection adequate? • Did issues emerge during the data analysis?
Methodology	• Are the methods being consistently & appropriately utilized?
Blind spots & oversights	• What was revealed?

Building Capacity for Evaluating Outcomes in TR (Continued)

March 2015 **TRAIN Project Consultant: Cathy Smith Hybels, Ph.D.**

Collaborative Members and GAS Implementation

All four members are premiere accredited PATH Intl TRCs located in Region One. The centers differ in size and on other important dimensions, as detailed in Table 2 below. All TRCs adopted the standardized session report & terminology and all began using GAS in their lessons by June 2014. Each TRC was responsible for training its instructors and volunteers on the GAS method, form, and procedures. TRC results were shared with TRAIN via Dropbox. The project consultant provided data analysis, and reporting.

Table 2: TRAIN Member Center Characteristics

Organization	Organization Basics				Lessons				
	Budget	Session length wk	# Sessions	Participant # per wk	Lesson Times	FT Instructors	PT Instructors	Group	Private
High Horses	246,500	7 & 8	6	45-60	30, 45 & 60 min	0	9	10% 2-3 per	90%
High Hopes	1.2 million	12 & 6	4	240	60min	5	12	95% Up to 5 per	5%
UpReach	382,500	6 & 8	6	72	TR 60 min TD 30 min	3	1	90% 2-4 per	10%
SVTRC	150,000	12	4	40-50	30 or 60	1	2	50%	50%

Each TRC was encouraged to customize the introduction of GAS within their center to best suit the needs, interests, and culture of their organization. Not surprisingly, no two centers used the same implementation approach, as detailed below in Table 3. All 4 centers did involve at least half of their TR instructors in using GAS sometime during 2014.

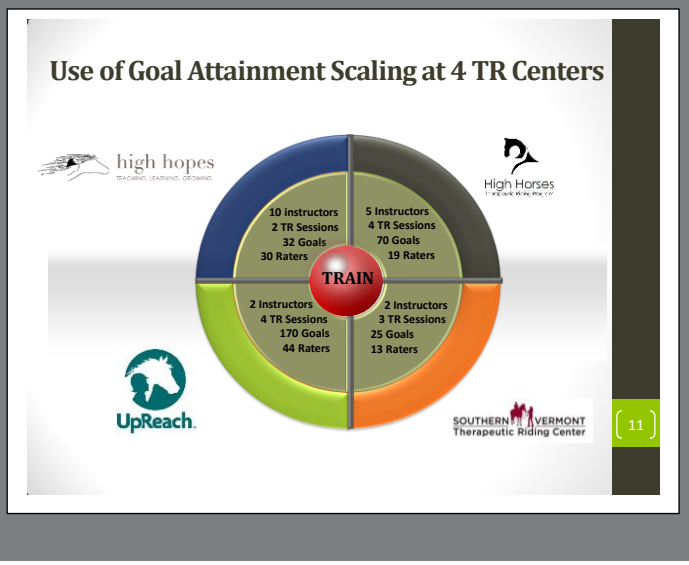
Table 3: Different GAS Implementation Strategies

TRAIN Member Center	# Instructors	Ave # Goals/Instructor	# Raters	Ave # Goals/Rater
High Hopes	10	3.2	30	1.06
High Horses	5	14	~17	3.68
Southern Vermont	2	12.5	13	1.92
UpReach	2	85	44	3.86

Each instructor was expected to develop individualized goal scales for participants in accordance with the GAS method, but the process accommodated divergent instructor strategies for using GAS. Table 4 below illustrates the variety of approaches that were utilized by instructors.

Table 4: Variants in Strategies Used for Writing TR goals

Approach	Strategy Variant 1	Strategy Variant 2
Participant (p) inclusion	Every p had a GAS goal	Selected p's had GAS goals
Number of GAS goals/p	2 goals per p	1 goal per p
GAS Goal variance	Unique goal for each p	Similar goals for all p's
GAS Goal originality	Original	Recycled/revised
Instructor's use of GAS	One session	Every session
GAS Goal periods	6 weeks	12 weeks
Expected p performance	Rated on typical perf	Rated on best perf



In total, 318 goal attainment scores were obtained across 13 TR sessions completed within 2014 at the 4 TRCs. Nineteen TR instructors participated, as did106 raters who evaluated participant goal attainment at the end of each session. Two TRAIN meetings were held. Goal attainment scales were written in 16 of 18 TR horsemanship skill areas and 14 supporting skills areas (as defined by the session report).

Lessons Learned

Process Review. Utilization of the session report for identifying goal areas and in defining skills was a significant benefit to instructors when writing goal attainment scales. The common terminology also facilitated reporting results. The flexibility of the GAS method allowed it to be uniquely fitted to each TRC and instructor. Members stated their overall approval of Dropbox for sharing data, forms, and shared presentation materials and reported that the TRAIN meetings were useful, interesting, and worthwhile.

Several process issues emerged that required attention or will need to be addressed going forward, including adoption of file naming conventions, uniformity in structuring goal attainment scale levels, and specification of expected participant performance (best vs. typical performance). Members recognized that greater collaboration with participants on goal identification is needed. Ongoing GAS training for instructors was identified as the greatest need going forward. The need for volunteer training in GAS (for support team members and raters) and assistance in planning and coordinating schedules so that enough raters are available at the end of each session to accommodate performance assessments emerged as important issues.

Building Capacity for Evaluating Outcomes in TR (Continued)

Resources Review. There was universal agreement that more resources will be needed going forward for the development and delivery of training in GAS procedures (for instructors and volunteers), including SMART goal writing training for instructors. The need for more training was the top concern identified in this study. This study also revealed that more resources were needed to support on-demand review and coaching in goal writing for instructors. Resources to support development and maintenance of a dedicated TRAIN website to facilitate the dissemination of materials to TR instructors as well as the TRC data entry was also recognized as an important need that best be addressed prior to TRAIN membership expansion.

Data Management Review. The feasibility study revealed several needed revisions to the GAS goal statement form. Going forward, TR instructors should identify the skill area(s) of focus at the same time they write their GAS goals. This process contrasts with procedures used during the feasibility study, where skill area codes were assigned by a data analyst (not the TR instructor) after goal attainment was assessed and while the data were being prepared for analysis. It is recommended that the GAS form also be modified to prompt instructors to describe how they anticipate the transfer of the targeted skill into the participant's daily activities, so that the crucial gains may be made in understanding the perceived links between skills taught in TR and their impact on participants' lives. The study also revealed that a structured section of the form is needed to consistently elicit instructions for support team members on how they can best support participant goal attainment.

Methodology Review. Not unexpectedly, an examination of the goals written by the TR instructors revealed a relatively high number of the common goal scaling errors, including scales that were not written in the present tense, multiple variables of change being included in a single goal, and unequal scale intervals. While the GAS literature suggests that these common errors tend to diminish with training and experience in SMART goal writing, it will be very important to offer ongoing training, coaching, and timely goal review and feedback to assist TR instructors in developing these crucial skills. In recognition of the limited resources available to support training and ongoing instructor support at each TRC, utilization of GAS-Lite might be considered for future use. Instructors utilizing GAS-Lite would be asked to write 2 SMART goal statements instead of 5 for each participant goal, thereby reducing the demands on instructors to generate SMART goal statements. There are potential drawbacks to use of GAS-Lite however, including questions about the increased demands placed on raters to accurately assess performance with a lesser defined scale. Such tradeoffs will need to be thoughtfully considered and studied in light of resource constraints and anticipated gains in measuring gains made in skill areas.

Review of the Unexpected. Although it was not within the original focus of the study, it became apparent that utilizing both the session report and GAS together will require ongoing attention to the development and coordination of both tools. Instructor GAS goals revealed omissions and ambiguities in session report terminology and keeping them synchronized in the future will require a commitment of resources.

Conclusions

Although the reviews above detail significant factors that may potentially affect future TRAIN **success,** the TR instructors and TRC executive directors attending TRAIN meetings repeatedly expressed their desire to continue to use GAS and participate in TRAIN. They shared that both GAS and TRAIN had influenced their teaching, enhanced collaboration with support team members, and increased their awareness of the potential impact of TR in the lives of their students. All four TRCs elected to continue using GAS and the session report in 2015. This display of commitment as well as the accounts they shared of enthusiastic volunteers, board members, participants and caregivers, suggests that the collaborative approach utilizing GAS offers tangible benefits to TRCs and instructors and merits continued use and further development for assessing the impact of therapeutic riding on those involved.