Fidelity vs. Adaptation
Adapted from CSAP’s Western CAPT, Indiana Prevention Resource Center, and “Getting to Outcomes”

Fidelity Defined
The degree of fit between the developer-defined components of a substance abuse prevention program, and its actual implementation in a given organizational or community setting.

Adaptation Defined
Deliberate or accidental modification of the program including deletions or additions, modifying the nature of the program’s components, changing intensity of components, or creating cultural adaptations.

Fidelity to SPF
Not only is it important to maintain fidelity to a chosen program, policy, or practice, but it is important to maintain fidelity to a planning model such as the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) and its five phases. That is, in order to meet the goals of the SPF SIG of increased prevention capacity and decreased use, a community must systematically step through each phase of the Framework always with an eye toward sustainability and cultural competency. Incomplete or missing activities within each phase compromise the success of the endeavor. However, adaptation to the local needs and priorities is important for stakeholder buy-in and programmatic success. Too much adaptation may degrade the intent of the program, policy, or practice to the extent that success is undermined. The best results occur when program fidelity is maintained with regard to the core components. However, if the program is not completely relevant or a perfect fit with community needs, then rigid adherence to the program implementation plan may not produce positive outcomes.

Balancing Fidelity and Adaptation
Striking a balance between fidelity and adaptation is crucial. This balancing act is a dynamic process, often evolving over time, by which those involved with implementing an evidence-based substance abuse prevention program address both the need for fidelity to the original program and the need for local adaptation. The ideal balance involves retaining elements of a program that analysis shows are most likely to account for its positive outcomes and adapting non-critical elements. To assist with this process, a fidelity instrument has been created for each SPF phase to monitor fidelity to each phase – not just intervention implementation.

Guidelines for balancing fidelity and adaptation
1. Identify and understand the theory base behind the program
2. Locate or conduct a core components analysis of the program
3. Assess fidelity/adaptation concerns for the particular implementation site
4. Consult as needed with a program developer
5. Consult with the organization and/or community in which the implementation will take place
6. Develop an overall implementation plan based on these inputs (create a logic model)

Process Evaluation and Fidelity
Process evaluation measures program fidelity by assessing which activities were implemented, and the quality, strengths, and weaknesses of the implementation. Process evaluation can be divided into three steps with associated measures:
- Planning – number and quality of meetings, attendance, agenda items, meeting effectiveness, meeting satisfaction ratings.
- Implementation – activities, dates, duration, attendance, and materials distributed.
- Post-implementation – participant satisfaction ratings, lessons learned, barriers, and champions.