



Pet Partners[®]

Touching Lives, Improving Health

***Professionalizing the Handler:
Honoring the Relationship Through
Competency Development***

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Introductions





Pocatello | Idaho Falls | Meridian | Twin Falls

Idaho State
UNIVERSITY



The Pet Partners Difference

- Rigorous evaluations and commitment to animal welfare/advocacy allow us to provide high quality, reliable HAIs while lessening risks for everyone involved
- This rigor and reliability is reflected in the relationship between animal and handler
- Emphasizing and increasing handler competency allows us to honor that relationship and further our position as providers of safe, high quality HAIs

The Highly Developed Working Relationship

- Qualities that characterize this relationship

(Stewart, Chang & Rice, 2014)

- Mutual Trust
- Effective Cross-Species Communication
- Respect
- Appreciation
- Advocacy
- Humor & Joy
- Nurturing & Affection
- Honoring power differentials
- Mutually beneficial

- *Handlers can best create, enhance, and safeguard through competency development*



What is Professionalized Competency?

- Specialized knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) are required to practice ethically and effectively in both general practice and in specialty areas (Toporek, Lewis, Health & Crethar, 2009)
 - AAI is a specialty area which requires a specialized set of skills and competencies (Stewart et al., 2013)
 - The lack of available discipline-specific knowledge and training continues to be a concern that is recognized by experienced AAI practitioners (Stewart, et al., 2013)
 - Counseling practitioners of AAT had been trying (unsuccessfully) to establish a national set of competencies for over a decade
- New, nationally endorsed competencies for professional counselors providing AAls were adopted by the American Counseling Association Executive Council in June 2016
 - Pet Partners recognized the applicability of these competencies to *all* providers of AAls, not just mental health professionals
 - By August 2016, Pet Partners collaborated to create a tiered model of AAI provider competencies to promote handler professionalization and better protect the humans and animals involved

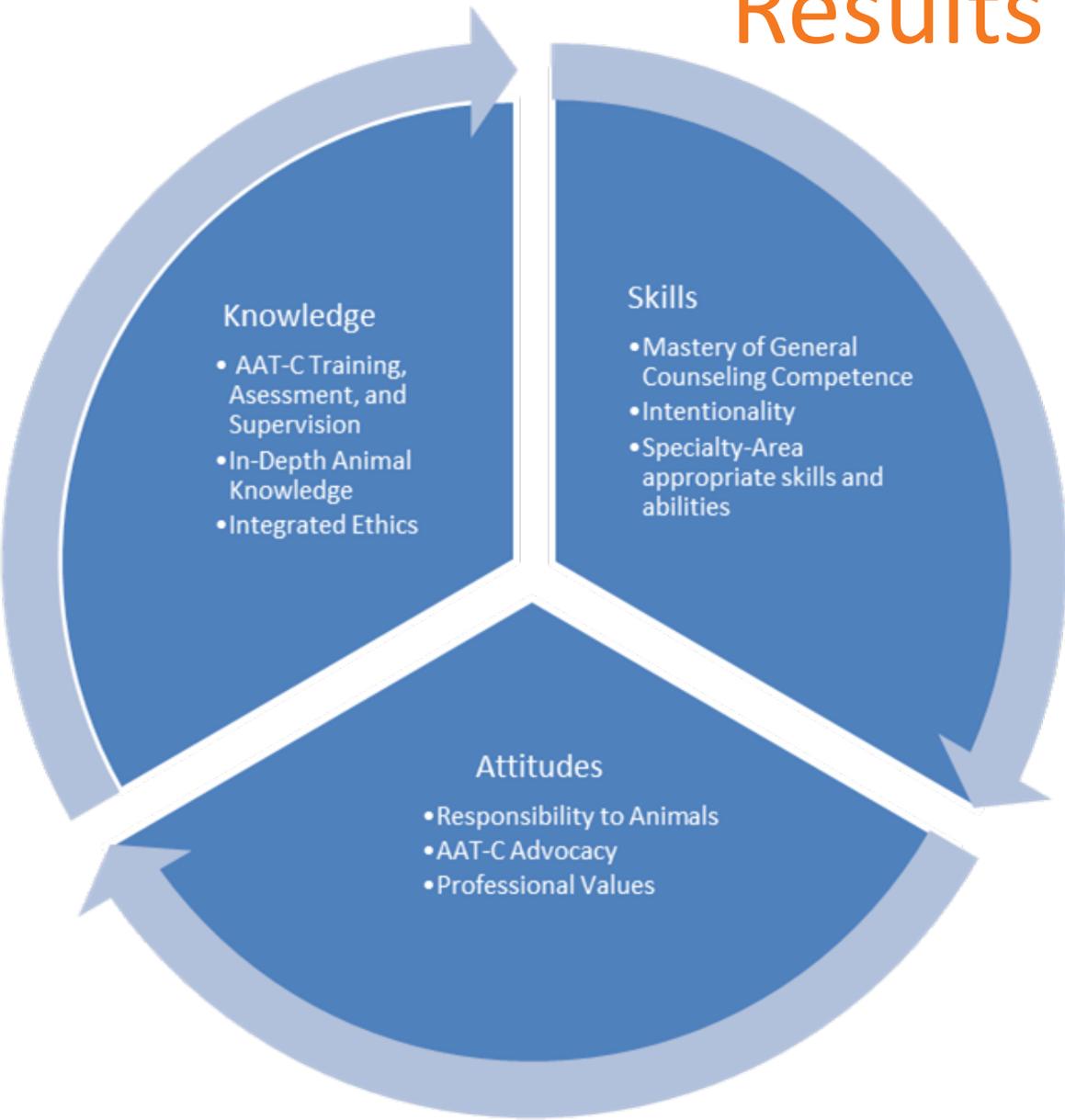
The Study

- Grounded Theory Model (GTM)
 - Followed the GTM model as described by Charmaz (2006) and the Hermeneutic Dialectic Process defined by Lincoln & Guba (1989)
- Quality Control
 - Due to its rigor, GTM is noted as one of the most influential research traditions in education & social sciences (Patton, 2002)
 - Confirmability (objectivity):
 - Maintained audit trail, including peer debriefing and memoing
 - Reviewed by external auditor with expertise in counseling competency and qualitative research
 - Dependability (trustworthiness):
 - Used constant comparative method during data collection & analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
 - Each interpretation was supported by direct participant quotes as evidence of how the codes and themes fit the data (Williams & Morrow, 2009)
 - Credibility:
 - Member Checking & Triangulation of Data verified the link between the researchers' realities and the participants' realities
 - Research Team Member Checking
 - Participant Member Checking

Participants

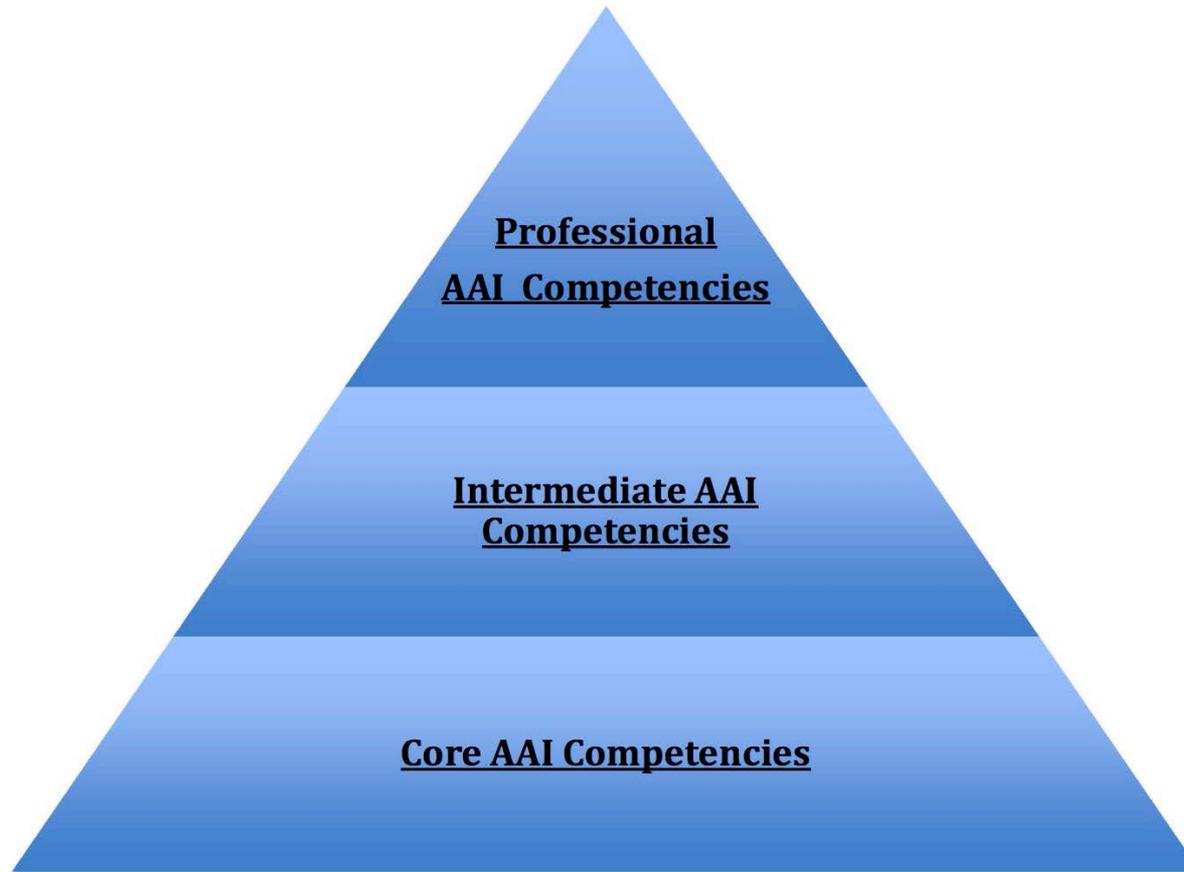
Participant Demographics	
All participants identified as White/Caucasian women	
Age	<i>M</i> =50 years (Range 27-64 years)
Licensure	5 LCSW 5 LP 12 LPC
Education Level	10 PhD 10 Master's
Years of Licensure	<i>M</i> =16 years
Practice Settings	Outpatient Office Residential/Institutional Farm/Ranch Nature/Ecology Center
Therapy Animal Species	Dogs (<i>n</i> =18) Horses (<i>n</i> =12)

Results



- Nine Essential Competency Areas
- 3 Domains of Competence
(Myers & Sweeny, 1990)
- Figure represents overview of major themes and subthemes

Tiered Model of Handler Competency



The Base Layer

- Core Competencies:
 - KSA required of animal-handler teams operating all levels and in all capacities.
- Examples:
 - Extensive, species-specific ethological knowledge about the therapy animal(s)
 - Establish & maintain a strong working relationship with the therapy animal(s)
 - Prioritizing responsibility to animals involved in AAI and effectively advocating for the animal
 - Willing to embrace the experiential nature of AAI by being cognitively present and responsive to ever-changing situational factors

The Base Layer:

Example Participant Quotes

- “This includes a deep understanding of the ethology (or cognitive ethology) of the species, what current knowledge is about the species, behavior, purposes of behavior for the animal. This also includes an understanding of development from birth, socialization, and the various things that can go wrong. It also includes an understanding of how to assess animals' basic behavior problems, and common medical or genetic issues”
- “Attitudes should include flexibility, ability to command a situation in the event of an emergency, compassion, and strong ability to create an experiential therapy”
- “Determined, constant vigilance for animal welfare and well-being. If the animal's welfare is assured, then the client's welfare is also assured”
- “As this is still a new field, the AAT-C counselor must be cognizant of staying professional to help reduce any stigma or misunderstanding others may have about AAT”

The Mid Layer

- Intermediate Competencies:
 - KSA required of animal-handler teams providing AAI in paraprofessional and professional capacities.
- Examples:
 - Successful completion of formal, discipline-specific coursework
 - Knowledge of how the human-animal bond can impact the treatment process
 - Knowledge of legal issues associated with AAI such as HIPPA, FERPA, and laws regarding confidential and privileged information
 - Skillful selections and assessment of AAI strategies

The Mid Layer:

Example Participant Quotes

- “An AAT practitioner should be able to demonstrate that the animal has a specific purpose in the therapeutic setting and be able to document how the animal assists the client in reaching treatment goals”
- “AAT practitioners should be able to demonstrate an extraordinary amount of flexibility within their work environment due to the inherently unpredictable nature of animals, even when they are trained for a specific purpose”
- “It is imperative that a formal certification process is undertaken and passed by the counselor/animal providing services”

The Top Layer

- Professional Competencies:
 - Discipline-specific KSA required of animal-handler teams in a professional capacity as an appropriately licensed or credentialed professional
- Examples:
 - AAI is successfully integrated into provider's personal model/philosophy of practice
 - Awareness of the provider's personal biases, including the impact of the provider's emotional bond with the animal and its impact on the treatment process
 - Ability to assess, interpret, and utilize the animal's responses in a therapeutically meaningful way
 - Active involvement in continuing education and engagement in professional development

The Top Layer:

Example Participant Quotes

- “The practitioner should be highly experienced in their area of expertise BEFORE they attempt to integrate animals”
- “[one must] identify and process psychological information produced by interactions with [animals], then use that information to create interactions that will further growth and healing”
- “An AAT therapist needs to understand the negative issues that may arise from using animals and be able to address those concerns using best practice research and standards”

Implications

- Volunteer standards are crucial for the industry, as professional standards are built upon them
- Every volunteer's commitment to professionalization through competency development raises the standard of all AAls and honors the human-animal relationship
- The more educated the handler, the more likely he/she is to make sound and informed decisions about HAIs