Chapter 3
DEVELOPING YOUR CURRICULUM

Your academy’s curriculum is an opportunity to shape your community’s victim service providers and guide them to feeling a sense of meaning and commitment to the victims’ movement. Additionally, it is an opportunity to demonstrate teaching through a trauma-informed, victim-centered, and culturally inclusive lens.

In this section, you will find information and resources to guide you through the basics of developing the curriculum for your state or territory’s academy.

A. Clarifying the Vision for the Curriculum
B. Foundational Concepts for Curriculum Development
C. Curriculum Content
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Clarifying the Vision for the Curriculum

In bringing your academy’s curriculum vision into focus, the steering committee should consult the results of the training needs assessment. This comprehensive assessment should survey existing training opportunities, reveal gaps in training and education, and assemble the collective needs of victim service providers and agencies. It also provides information on faculty, student populations, and schedule, which enables you to focus on the desired outcomes that are unique to your state or territory. For more information on the needs assessment, revisit that section in Chapter 1.

Using the needs assessment, begin to clarify the vision for your curriculum by considering the following:

- **What level of education are you trying to build?** Are you providing foundational education for new students or ongoing education for experienced students?

- **Who will attend the academy?** Will attendees include victim advocates, community-based advocates, justice system-based advocates, and/or allied professionals? Will attendees be limited to those who work directly with victims or expand to include long-term volunteers, law enforcement, those in administration, and any others that interact with victims?

- **What type of learning will you provide for your students?** Will there be both in-person and web-based classes? Is the focus on content knowledge, practical skills, or both?

- **What will your specific learning objectives be?** What do you want participants to take away? How will these be measured? Do these objectives reflect most aspects of the needs assessment?

Clearly identifying the goals and learning objectives for your curriculum will help state the purpose of your training in concrete, measurable terms. Learning objectives also serve as a type of contract with your audience—if participants know the objectives from the beginning, they know what they are expected to learn.

For assistance in writing learning objectives, consider reviewing *Bloom’s Taxonomy* for assistance. There are extensive resources online which describe this method in detail.

Foundational Concepts for Curriculum Development

There are several foundational concepts that contribute to the strength of a comprehensive SVAA curriculum.

1. **Based on Principles of Adult Learning**

   Incorporating adult learning principles will make your curriculum more effective. This brief publication outlines the principles of adult learning and explains how to apply them in training to engage adult learners.

2. **Victim-Centered**

   This approach is defined as the systematic focus on the needs and concerns of a victim or survivor to ensure the compassionate and sensitive delivery of services in a nonjudgmental manner. A victim-centered approach seeks to minimize re-traumatization associated with the criminal justice process. This is done by providing the support of victim advocates and service providers, empowering survivors as engaged participants in the process, and providing survivors an opportunity to play a role in seeing their perpetrators brought to justice.

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3. **Trauma-Informed**

These *six principles*, outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), are able to be generalized across settings and should be incorporated into all aspects of academy planning, including curriculum.

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice, and choice
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues

4. **Culturally Inclusive**

A culturally inclusive curriculum reflects the diversity of attendees and the victims they serve. A commitment to broaden attendees' viewpoints and skill sets can be achieved by challenging language, behavior, and assumptions that are biased and non-inclusive while inviting the multiplicity of expression and experience into the classroom.

5. **Grounded in the Victims’ Movement**

A *historical perspective* of the victims’ movement provides essential context to help students appreciate the efforts of the early pioneers and recognize the importance of protecting victims’ rights. Students feeling like they are part of a movement also emphasizes the larger collective to which they belong.

6. **Evidence-Based**

Including the latest research in your curriculum sets a standard of continual improvement and utilization of proven practices for students’ work. This is important both for those receiving services and to demonstrate to funders. Consider reviewing

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OVC’s Vision 21 report for additional information about incorporating research into practice.

7. **Peer-to-Peer**

Some of the most valuable learning happens outside of the established curriculum through peer-to-peer connections. In addition to the support derived from others in the same field, advocates have much to gain by getting to know their peers. By creating opportunities for formal and informal learning from one other, attendees may glean important, practical, and applicable information. With personal knowledge of other agencies, systems, providers, and services, advocates are able to make “warm” referrals to those programs and providers. A well-resourced, informed advocate increases quality referrals, enhances service to victims, and improves a trauma-informed practice.

Read more about relevant criteria related to training and education at OVC’s page about incorporating their model standards into your academy.

**Curriculum Content**

As previously discussed, curriculum content will be largely driven by and aligned with what is revealed in the needs assessment and what best meets your state’s or territory’s needs. Although there are no required courses, certain topics are commonly offered in most basic or foundational training academies such as “The History of the Victims’ Movement.” All classes typically include a mix of information and skill building.

Consider the list of topics below, many of which align with the National Advocate Credentialing Program:

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**Foundational content** often includes:

- Advocacy/Role of the Advocate
- Cultural Sensitivity/Competency
- Case Management/Coordination
- Ethics/Confidentiality
- Civil/Criminal Justice System
- Crime Victim Compensation
- History of the Victims’ Movement
- Trauma of Victimization
- Crisis Intervention
- Vicarious Trauma

Advanced or specialty training topics may include:

- Special Populations
- Domestic Violence
- Sexual Assault
- Child Abuse
- Drunk Driving
- Homicide
- Campus Advocacy

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Building professional relationships with colleagues creates an informal support network that is essential to this field. Having a variety of tools and resources reduces the feelings of helplessness in advocates and increases their senses of competence and confidence.

Consider activities in the following domains:

- **Physical**: Plan an optional yoga class, take standing or stretch breaks, offer a walking group in the evening
- **Social**: Coordinate optional activities like group meals, a movie or trivia night, or a tour of a local attraction
- **Spiritual**: Consider the spiritual and religious needs of attendees and schedule academy events based on those, offer a guided meditation session, offer time in nature
- **Emotional**: Offer a structured debrief, make senior staff or faculty available and accessible for private check-ins as needed
- **Intellectual**: Moderate discussions around current topics in the field, discuss post-academy professional development opportunities

Academies should also encourage attendees’ employers to exempt them from all but the most important calls and emails during their participation in the academy. Allowing the students to immerse themselves in their classes without distraction prioritizes their learning and amplifies the importance of professional resiliency.

### Promoting Professional Resiliency During the Academy

Vicarious trauma has long been recognized as a risk for those working in the victim services field. A course that educates advocates about the risk for and normalization of the occurrence of vicarious trauma is important to consider including in your curriculum.

Teaching about and promoting practices to decrease vicarious trauma models self-care and capitalizes on peer support, which is critical in reducing it. For further information on what organizations can do to address vicarious trauma, visit the [Vicarious Trauma Toolkit](#), a project of OVC.

Consider these ways of promoting self-care, also known as professional resiliency, throughout the academy:

- Allowing students to get to know one another through icebreakers and fun activities
- Including opportunities for small group discussion and reflection
- Allowing for unstructured downtime
- Planning opportunities for students to build relationships and expand their professional networks through intentional rooming assignments, seating arrangements, and group exercises

### Curriculum Planning Considerations

There are many practical elements that may influence the format and delivery of your curriculum. These include:

- Length of academy
- Blended learning
- Academy location
- Sequencing of modules
- Number of attendees
Length of Academy

There is no standardized way to deliver an academy. States and territories have utilized a variety of configurations, but a 40-hour curriculum is a good baseline. While the original mandate and continued “gold standard” for SVAAs is 40 hours of onsite training spread over several days, states and territories have used a variety of designs to deliver a full curriculum. Explore the variety of SVAA configurations through the online Dashboard.

Blended Learning

If your needs assessment results have indicated that cost and/or time required are challenges to attending trainings, a blended learning model may be a useful tool for your curriculum. Academies often utilize blended learning to cover the complete academy curriculum, which incorporates webinar participation prior to beginning the academy. An informal 2016 survey by the SVAA Resource Center shows that 75% of responding SVAAs use Victim Assistance Training Online (VAT Online) courses as supplemental learning for their academies.

Academy Location

The location of the academy can influence the curriculum as certain venues may offer special technology or events that can be incorporated into—and shape—the trainings offered.

Sequencing of Modules

An impactful curriculum notes the sequencing of topics covered and divides the content into modules. It also allocates the time required for each module and decides how to present the content using multiple training strategies.

Number of Attendees

The number of attendees at your academy may be influenced by a number of outside factors (like venue limitations), but a thoughtful decision about the ideal group size based on your content and activities will be beneficial in curriculum design.

For tips on developing effective learning for adults, refer to the Effective Adult Learning toolkit developed by the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice at the University of Washington and the Network for Public Health Law.

The OVC Training and Technical Assistance Center’s (TTAC) Victim Assistance Training Online courses offer a no-cost, foundational web-based victim assistance training program that focuses on the essential skills and knowledge professionals need to effectively assist victims of crime. VAT Online has four sections (Basics, Core Competencies and Skills, Crimes, and Specific Considerations for Providing Victim Services) with various modules in each section. VAT Online does not have to be completed in its entirety. Academies can pick and choose which modules or sections best meet their needs.

- The Basics section includes information that all victim service providers must know, including victims’ rights and the justice systems, and provides a foundation for victim services
- The Core Competencies and Skills section includes modules covering basic communication skills, confidentiality, and advocacy
- The Crimes section includes characteristics and prevalence of crimes including sexual assault, elder abuse, and child abuse
- The Specific Considerations for Providing Victim Services section includes information and skills to serve populations such as LGBTQ victims, campus/university victims of crime, and victims of sexual assault in the military.
When to Seek Curriculum Review

Academies supported through VOCA funds are asked to work with OVC TTAC for any newly created or substantially revised curricula to ensure compliance with OVC’s Instructional Design Standards. Consultation and support regarding changes to smaller portions of an academy is available via the SVAA Resource Center. Directors should contact the SVAA Resource Center for guidance in determining the proper parties to assist in curriculum development for both of these entities.

OVC’s Instructional Design Standards are based on the ADDIE approach to developing training: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. This model is intended to help ensure that:

- Participant needs dictate training content
- The goals of the trainings are met by participants
- The trainings are the same each time they are delivered
- Specific, measurable outcomes are used to evaluate training efficacy

Additionally, the Instructional Design Standards support OVC’s training mission: to provide information and learning experiences to victim service providers and allied professionals to expand their knowledge and assist in developing their skills to better serve the needs of victims.


Credentialing and Credit

Students may be seeking professional recognition for their participation in the academy such as credentialing at the state, territory, or national level; college credit; or continuing education units for professional licensing. You may consider engaging in the process of having your academy curriculum certified if your needs assessment shows that trainees are interested in credentialing or CEU credits.

Consider the following options:

National Advocate Credentialing Program (NACP)

Developed by the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), NACP is the first voluntary national credentialing program for crime victim advocates. This program offers online training and credentialing for individual advocates as well as credentialing for programs at the national, state, territory, and local levels, to include SVAAs.

There are approximately 49 state, local and university credentialed programs (30 of which are through SVAAs), 7 military programs, and 4 national (online) programs credentialed by NACP. NACP offers four levels of credentialing: Provisional, Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced.

State or Territory Programs

Some states or territories have their own certification or credentialing that may be required for certain advocates, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or
A Complete Guide to Establishing and Operating a Victim Assistance Academy

University Education and Certificates

While there are many colleges and universities that offer individual courses, there are a limited number of schools that offer undergraduate or graduate degrees in victim services or victimology. Often it can be a concentration for another degree such as criminal justice or psychology. There are also many universities that offer college credit or a certificate in victim advocacy through the use of a curriculum developed by the Center for Legal Studies, a for-profit entity. This curriculum is offered online, through DVD, or via written material.

Continuing Education Credits (CEUs)

Some academies offer CEUs to their professionally licensed students (i.e. licensed social workers, mental health counselors, or marriage and family therapists) who are required to document their continuing education credits with their state or territory licensing body. Consider having your curriculum approved for CEUs by the following associations:

- National Association of Social Workers
- American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists
- American Counseling Association