

# **Boomerang Proposal**

Submitted to Laura Short, Director  
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Submitted by: Dawn Henderson  
Psychology in the Public Interest  
North Carolina State University  
Raleigh, NC 27609

### ***Psychology in the Public Interest Program***

Psychology in the Public Interest (PPI) promotes faculty and student participation in collaborative research activities with public and private organizations. Emphasis is given to the development and evaluation of program interventions and policies for important social issues, which often include problems faced by a disadvantaged group. Opportunities for action-oriented research have been found within public and private organizations as well as local and international community settings.

PPI students acquire core knowledge in the areas of organizational behavior, community psychology, socio-technical theory, social interactions and inequality, and educational performance. The program also affords opportunities for students to develop competencies in a broad set of scientific methodologies including survey development, experimental and quasi-experimental analysis, qualitative methods, program planning and evaluation, simulation models, and management information systems (Psychology in the Public Interest, 2007)

### **Researcher's Background:**

Dawn Henderson has a Bachelor in Science and Master of Education and currently pursuing a doctorate in Psychology with a concentration in community psychology. She began her career as a middle school science teacher in a charter school that focused on economically disadvantaged students. After teaching for three and a half years, she entered into higher education working with initiatives to promote access, inclusion and retention of minority students. She has worked with TRIO Programs and other precollege programs to assist students in transitioning into higher education. She has conducted research in a grant writing firm, with the University of Michigan, and the Graduate School at NC State University on numerous projects that either directly or indirectly affect the educational trajectory of youth. She has additional administrative experience working with first-year and retention programs at Saint Augustine's College, Temple University and NC State University. Her evaluation experience includes work with a charter school in Raleigh, the SPACE Program at NC State University, and a current project with the National Y-USA. Her research interests include, empowerment evaluation, educational access and success among low-income and minority populations, and the role of organizations in transforming the psychosocial skills of youth.

### **Rationale and Implications:**

An ecological framework provides insight into social phenomena that specifically explains how individual behavior and activity emerge as a function of the environment. An ecological framework posits that individual behavior is a function of interactions both within and between systems or context (e.g., neighborhoods, communities, institutions, etc.). More specifically, an ecological framework understands that individuals are embedded within complex and dynamic systems that are multilayered, having both direct and indirect effects on the behavior of the individual and system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). When considering youth and the myriad settings in which they interact, an ecological framework provides a view that illustrates ways in which formal and informal settings can affect youth development (Roth-Herbst, Borbely, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008).

Current literature in youth development has placed an emphasis on interventions and programs that address the context in which youth are embedded. Theoretically, it is proposed that interventions and programs that integrate and target multiple contexts have more utility in addressing positive youth development (Kerns & Printz, 2002). For this reason, an ecological program would shift individual-focused interventions towards models that engage both proximal and distal contexts (Jakes & Brookins, 2004), such as the family, school, and other community settings. In addition, theoretically, when interventions integrate these settings they are able to form collaborations that foster the capacity and

sustainability of models that continue to support positive youth development (Sabetelli, Anderson, & LaMotte, 2005).

For decades, community organizations such as the YMCA have been recognized as viable entities that promote positive outcomes among youth and their communities (Hartmaan, Watson, & Kantorek, 2001). The ability to be responsive and highly adaptable to the changing needs of the communities in which these YMCAs exist have contributed to their sustainability; however, very little research has explicitly examined this process and how it translates into program effectiveness. Furthermore, the need to broaden understanding of ecological programming and its effect on youth development are essential objectives to practitioners and researchers. Thus, the primary aim of this study seeks to employ a case-study analysis of the YMCA's Boomerang Program to assess whether it adheres to an ecological programming model and its impact on youth outcomes. More specifically, this study seeks to examine the history, characteristics, processes and outcomes of the Boomerang Program and its implications on the youth involved.

**Goals:**

This project will employ a case study analysis of the YMCA-Carrboro/Chapel Hill Boomerang Program, with the goal of beginning site visitations and conducting the initial phase of interviews by the summer of 2011. Outcomes associated with this study will address the following objectives as outlined by Boomerang and Dawn Henderson. They include:

- Capture follow up data about program participants (focus groups, one-on-one interviews, etc.)
- Improve data collection systems (recommendations)
- Formalize qualitative data
- Document the unique context of Boomerang to guide the development of a best-practice model.
- Identify specific characteristics of the Boomerang Program and its impact on youth.
- Increase visibility of the Boomerang program through research conclusions and dissemination.

**Methods:**

This study seeks to employ a mixed-methods approach, which includes the collection of qualitative and quantitative data to assess the context and impact of the Boomerang Program. Qualitative methods will include conducting focus groups, interviews with various stakeholders (steering committee members, parents, and students), site observations and reviewing program materials. Quantitative methods will include the dissemination of questionnaires and measures to program participants and partners.

**Proposed Timeline:**

The time devoted to this project will be from August until May 2012, with additional follow up in the summer of 2012 to present findings and member checking for accuracy of qualitative analysis. A summative report will be turned in to the Boomerang Program.