

**Independent Living Resources, Inc.
411 Andrews Road, Suite 230
Durham NC 27705**

Final Research Report:

SBIR Phase I

**Guardian ad Litem – Court Appointed
Special Advocate Academy**

(Volunteer Advocate Academy)

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July 2006 – March 2007

Phase I Final Report – July 1, 2006- March 31, 2007

Specific Aims - In Phase I we developed and evaluated the first of a ten-module online and DVD e-Learning program for court appointed special advocates – CASA and Guardian ad Litem volunteers - and CASA/GAL program staffs. This multimedia package is intended to provide volunteers and program staffs with information on adolescents who are involved with the child welfare and juvenile/family court systems. The approach uses an innovative, interactive multimedia format in which viewers listen in on the first meeting of an adolescent and a GAL volunteer. The e-learner (program user) then follows the course of discussions between the adolescent and volunteer, and the volunteer with her GAL Supervisor, to a point where the GAL prepares the adolescent for a dispositional court hearing that could determine if the youth can return home.

The evaluation study focused on e-Learning technology, educational design and the initial pieces of media development (Internet and DVD) for reaching target groups (CASA and GAL volunteers and program staffs). This was accomplished by testing feasibility with a range of new GAL volunteers and program staffs (N=137) to determine the ability of these groups to access and use computers, the Internet, and multimedia materials in a range of settings (urban and rural, home and office). We have included copies of both the e-Learning Module One online program on CD-Rom for reviewers to view without having to access the Internet, and copies of the DVD program for review. (See accompanying materials and directions for use.)



Several objectives guided our research activities:

1. Raise awareness of CASA/GAL volunteers within North Carolina and on a national level in relation to accessibility of e-Learning opportunities related to their roles as court appointed special advocates.
2. Devise a system for disseminating currently fragmented information regarding adolescents, human development, courtroom planning, and report preparation.
3. Develop and evaluate feasibility and potential effectiveness of multimedia programming in reaching CASA/GAL volunteers and program staffs.

4. Gather data on difference between DVD and Website trainings in knowledge gained.

A challenging aspect of Phase I was to determine the target groups' access to equipment and the Internet for use of multimedia materials. Initially, we planned on randomly selecting and surveying adult volunteers and program staffs by mail. However, as described below, our meetings with volunteers and program staffs led us to believe that the demographic profile of CASA/GAL volunteers and staffs paralleled available study data on computer and Internet use (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2006). This allowed us to make a reasonable assumption that a majority of volunteers and program staffs had access to computers and the Internet. The results of our recruitment of study participants proved that this was an accurate assumption.

Starting at the point of funding we contacted and met with a number of administrators and volunteers from the North Carolina GAL program (our study participant base). We also attended, set up a display table, met with volunteers and program staffs, and the Director of Operations for National CASA at the NCGAL Statewide Annual Conference that was held in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in September of 2006. The Director of NCGAL, Jane Volland, profiled our project during the opening session. Ms. Volland asked NCGAL program staffs to contact us both during the conference and after to learn more about our study and how they might assist us in completing the project.

All of the non-conference meetings were held at ILR offices or NCGAL offices throughout our region. We received overwhelming support for the project from everyone we met with during the meetings. GAL staffs in particular were very quick to point out the need for training on adolescents to increase the pool of volunteers who would be willing to take on adolescent court cases and who subsequently, would make more fundamentally sound recommendations in their reports to juvenile and family courts.

Our meeting with the Director of Operations for National CASA has led to a tentative agreement to collaborate on the development of the full e-Learning program. During Phase II we will be involving National CASA in the material review process. We are also excited that this collaboration could lead to full support from the National CASA Association for our Phase III efforts. This support will enhance our ability to fully market the CASA/GAL Academy to the 70,000 plus volunteers within the United States and to CASA groups in other countries. In addition, after the point of funding for Phase I, ILR learned that National CASA owned the trademark rights to the CASA acronym. Collaboration between ILR and National CASA will allow ILR to use the CASA descriptor on materials developed and for marketing the e-Learning online and DVD program (See: *Commercialization Plan*).

Product Development -For Phase I we developed the project under the www.casa-gal-academy.com URL, but in actuality referred to the program as the *GAL Academy*. The reasoning was two-fold. First, in Phase I the study was only using GAL volunteers from the State of North Carolina and that program is identified as the NC Guardian ad Litem Program and not CASA. Second, after ILR learned that the CASA acronym was a registered trademark, we felt judicious

use of the name would be appropriate until we had permission to use the acronym. As mentioned earlier in this text, we have involved National CASA Association in a collaborative effort and that trademark use and program name will be clearly defined during Phase II.

The project team, which included the principal investigator, program coordinator, director of multimedia, video producer, and director of research, developed the website and DVD materials in several stages. To begin, the team developed basic storyboards for the *GAL Academy*. We agreed on a storyline and the major points we wanted to include in the introductory module. We agreed that the first module would become a prelude to the nine modules proposed for Phase II and that it was critical that the materials reinforce accepted standards of practice while providing clarification about the role of CASA/GAL volunteers and programs nationally.

We storyboarded the initial outline and refined the points to more clearly touch on the major aspects of the overall ten-module program. The team looked at different educational designs and brought in a consultant to review the designs we were developing in-house. The team wanted to parallel the online learning experience with DVD lessons and used educational design formats that would allow the two e-Learning experiences to be very similar. As the team reworked the outline and topics, a consensus was reached that clear integration of video story telling; narration, and text would be the best design for both presentation and learning.

Video Story Telling - In reviewing a large number of e-Learning programs and from our own experiences with online and DVD learning programs, the project team determined that video sequencing, on-camera narration, and interspersed text would provide a vibrant and user friendly program that would be a state-of-the-art educational design.

Using these elements, the team developed the story of an adolescent who had been removed from his biological family and was now residing in a group home while awaiting disposition of his case in family court. A GAL is assigned to the adolescent's case to present information and recommendations to a judge who would determine either a preliminary or final disposition. It was agreed that we would use existing demographic data for foster youth and volunteers to determine representative actors for video sequences. The GAL volunteer would be a Caucasian, married, female, mother, approximately 40 years old, and college educated. The adolescent would be a young African-American male whose family included his mother, younger sister, and mother's live-in boyfriend. We decided to recruit a Hispanic male for on-camera narration and an African American woman as the GAL supervisor. In Phase II, the team will be able to represent an even wider-range of gender, ethnic, and minority groups as the cadre of actors and video sequences expand.

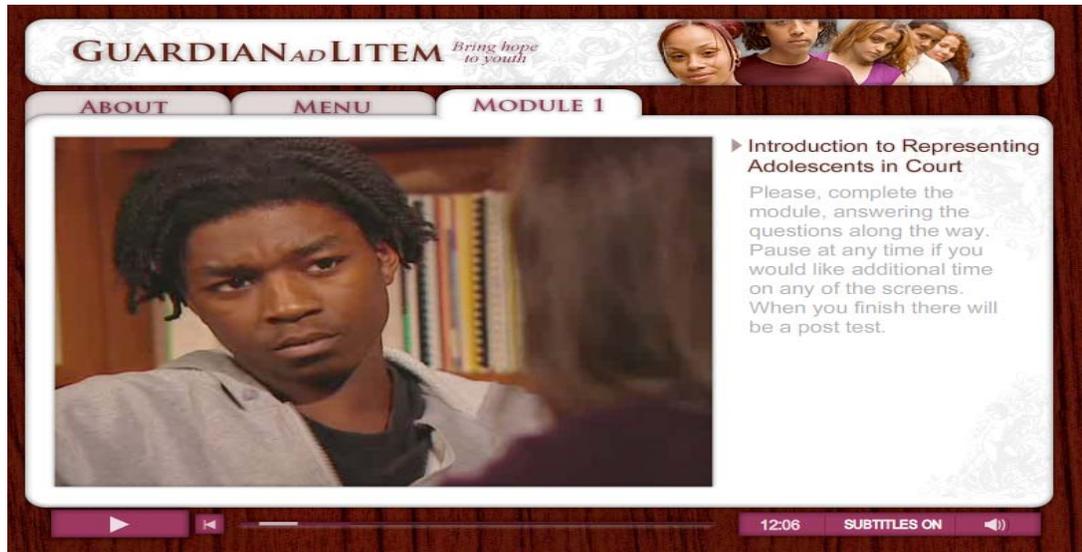
During this process, module topics and scripts were reworked numerous times to develop clarity, control over time needed to complete the module, and to maintain user interest. The team worked with media consultants at Horizon Video to develop technical aspects for programming the storyboards. This process produced the GAL Academy masthead, DVD cover, video scenarios, text

insertions, pre- and posttests, intermediary learning points, DVD layout, online registration and consent forms, and database structure.



Videos and Text - The project team outlined and scripted content for each of the video segments through an iterative process. The PI wrote original script concepts; the PI, program coordinator, and video executive director then developed full video scripts. Next, the video producer was asked to review the scripts and assist in determining final scripting for videotaping. The team also developed cast requirements for minority and gender representation. Casting calls were held for actors to determine a “fit” with the team’s vision. Tapes were made of casting calls and actors were picked from these “cuts” for roles. Shooting was completed over a two-month period at ILR offices and the video production studios. Shootings were mainly on weekends to accommodate actors and reduce noise and distractions at ILR offices. One scene was shot in front of a local courthouse.

The scripting was developed to show that adolescents and GAL volunteers are often from two very different socio-economic worlds and that basic misunderstandings are many times the basis for mistrust that leads to ineffective court representation. The educational design was to present story visualizations, a mature on-camera narration, rollover matching screen text, text learning points, and reinforcement of knowledge content. Video and text topics were race, adolescent development, strengths and needs of adolescents, honesty – keeping no secrets, identification of problems, personal safety of involved youth, juggling of priorities, crises and trauma, supervisory support, and involving and preparing youth for court.



Website/DVD

Website - Once the team had agreed on video concepts a website multimedia specialist was brought on to the team. We were determined to create a look and depth of materials that were engaging and state-of-the-art for CASA/GAL volunteers. Our approach was to catch the users attention with video sequencing, bring in a narrator on-camera, and provide learning points and refresher information. Short, within-program summary, multiple-choice questions lead a user to more in-depth information on the subject. Descriptive information is presented for the user after a multiple-choice answer is chosen – this occurs no matter what answer is chosen - learning redundancy. A user can manipulate the “screen bar” situated below the main display box to move forward and back in the program.



DVD – the e-Learning experience is similar to the website learning with minor alterations to accommodate the user. The DVD has “Continue” and “Return” buttons to allow the user to review text before moving on to the next screen (move forward or backwards). The opening screens on both versions present the title and a menu of the complete program (ten modules). Module 1 is highlighted and active for the Phase I study.



Narrator

The narrator was originally projected to be an adolescent who provides general information about the program. During storyboarding and scripting it was decided that an adult could perform this role for the introductory module with the same impact. The team then envisioned a mature male who would be similar to projected users by age and education (well-spoken and positive). The narrator was intended to “encourage” visitors to think about adolescents and all aspects of Modules One - Ten. The team looked at various ways that a narrator could be integrated into the site; on-camera, off-camera, prop set, or cast-over white. The on-camera, cast-over white was chosen so that we could also scroll information and provide special broadening for both the online and DVD experiences. This allowed the team to choose darker colors for bordering and optimum contrasting.

GUARDIAN AD LITEM *Bring hope to youth*

ABOUT MENU **MODULE 1**

GUARDIAN AD LITEM ACADEMY

▶ **Introduction to Representing Adolescents in Court**
Please, complete the module, answering the questions along the way. Pause at any time if you would like additional time on any of the screens. When you finish there will be a post test.

11:20 SUBTITLES ON

GUARDIAN AD LITEM *Bring hope to youth*

ABOUT MENU **MODULE 1**

Youths you work with may suffer delays in development.

- ▶ Do not assume that chronological age matches emotional development.
- ▶ Consider their stage of development, not just their age.

▶ **Introduction to Representing Adolescents in Court**
Please, complete the module, answering the questions along the way. Pause at any time if you would like additional time on any of the screens. When you finish there will be a post test.

8:11 SUBTITLES ON

Research Design – Online Registration - Early in the process of developing program materials for use by study participants, the project team was able to determine that virtually all NC GAL volunteers and program staffs had access to a computer either at home or in the GAL local offices. Based on this information, it was decided that the project team would develop online information and human subjects consent forms. Under the www.casa-gal-academy.com URL, a secure section was setup for interested study participants to review general information,

complete a basic demographics form, and preview and print off consent information letters and signature forms. The URL was secured with a SSL certificate to ensure confidentiality. Consent letters and forms would be printed off by participants, signed, and returned either via mail or facsimile. The approach made it possible to have a fairly seamless signup process. Ninety-five percent of study participants chose to fax their signed consents to ILR. The balance used the US Mail to return completed consent forms. This approach also initiated a project approach of communicating to study participants electronically – via e-mail. This method of communication was readily accepted and supported by the NCGAL program that had actively been developing this method for regular internal communication with volunteers and program staffs.

Participants - Study participants comprised 137 GAL volunteers and program staffs recruited through the North Carolina Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program. Volunteers were drawn from 86 towns and 56 counties (NC has 100 counties). These represented both rural and urban towns, and large, medium, and small population counties across the state.

During August and September, ILR staffs meet with key NCGAL administrators and program staffs to provide them with information about the project and the desire to have new (within three months of joining a program) volunteers and program staffs participate in the testing of the first module of a proposed ten module e-Learning program on adolescents involved in the child welfare and court systems. ILR staff also had signup sheets for use at display tables and after meetings for potential study participants to enroll in the project. The difficulty in signing up participants was compounded by: a) timing the completion of the test website for users to access; b) having participants involved within their first three months on the job; and c) working around traditional holidays in late November and December. We also did not want participants waiting inordinate amounts of time for the site to come online or to receive a DVD. The team decided to start developing a list of participants, but to hold off on a full recruitment effort until December 1, 2006, with an actual user start day set for Friday, January 12, 2007. This plan necessitated our request to NIH for a six-month extension for completion of the study. Our NIH contacts recommended a six-month extension with the option to complete the study at an earlier date.

On December 1, 2006, ILR Office Manager and Research Assistants starting contacting NCGAL administrators by e-mail with follow-up telephone contacts notifying them that the registration site was available. These same methods were repeated through the third week in December. A hiatus was taken through the New Year holiday. During the first week in January we renewed our efforts to sign up participants. Particular attention was paid to making sure we had solid minority and gender representation. We were very successful in recruiting Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian participants, but encountered some difficulty in developing a US population representation for males. In general, the CASA/GAL population in the US is between 85-90% female and NCGAL is equally lacking in male GAL volunteers. We were able to recruit males for a 21% study representation. (See: Enrollment Chart below.) We believe that in Phase II we will be able to have an even stronger representative group because we will be

canvassing nationally for subjects. We also have the support of a member of the National CASA Minority Representation Committee (see letter of support from Cy Gurney) to assist us in our plans to increase minority enrollment.

TARGETED/PLANNED ENROLLMENT: Number of Subjects			
Ethnic Category	Sex/Gender		
	Females	Males	Total
Hispanic or Latino	5	0	5
Not Hispanic or Latino	105	27	132
Ethnic Category: Total of All Subjects *	110	27	137
Racial Categories			
American Indian/Alaska Native	3	1	4
Asian	1	0	1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0	1
Black or African American	23	4	27
White	81	23	104
Racial Categories: Total of All Subjects *	109	28	137

All potential candidates were e-mailed a Consent Cover Letter and Signature forms for review. In addition, directions were included on how candidates could sign up for the study online at the GAL Academy website. All study participants signed up online. Once study participants completed the online portion of the signup process, demographic data was automatically entered into the study database on a dedicated secure server. The database retained all user demographic information and added fields for random group assignment and pre- and posttest scores.

Group Assignment - Using a random numbers table, participants were assigned to one of four study groups. The groups were contacted on January 12, 2007 via e-mail with program instructions. Group access was designed so that participants in some groups could not access all sections of the site or could only access certain sections within specified time frames.

- **Group One (40 participants) - Website Only** - would login to the website with their e-mail addresses, take the pretest; proceed through the e-Learning program, and complete the posttest. All tasks needed to be completed by January 31, 2007.
- **Group Two (40 participants) – DVD Only** - would login and take the pretest. Participants would then logout of the site. ILR would then receive electronic notification of completion of the pretest and mail a DVD version of Module I for viewing by participants. Participants would review the DVD, return to website, login, and complete the posttest by February 9, 2007.

- **Group Three (20 participants) – Pre- Posttest Only** - would login and complete the pretest by January 31, 2007. This group would then return after February 1, 2007 to complete the posttest by February 9, 2007.
- **Group Four (20 participants) – Posttest Only** - would login after February 1, 2007 and complete the posttest by February 9, 2007.

Honorariums – Initially, participants' payments were set at two different levels. In developing the specifics for each group it was determined that an honorarium of \$40 would be paid to every participant regardless of group assignment. This was also the same honorarium paid to focus group participants.

Focus groups – We used two types of focus groups for Phase I. First, we utilized staff at the North Carolina GAL State Administrative Offices to meet as “brown bag” focus groups over two separate lunch periods. The first group met in the project's third month and evaluated the scripts and storyboards for the Introductory Module. A second group met, viewed, and discussed the DVD and website in the sixth month (December of 2006). Both groups were very interested in the materials and approached the project team about setting up meetings to discuss Phase I materials. The groups were made up of state administrative program staff including the Director of NCGAL. At the conclusion of each meeting a coordinating member of both groups e-mailed us with comments, suggestions, etc.

The second type of group was traditional and involved two focus groups with 7-8 GAL volunteers and program staffs for each. Both meetings were held in January 2007. The first group was held at Wake County, North Carolina Administration of the Courts, Guardian ad Litem Program Offices in Raleigh, North Carolina (Eastern NC). The second was at the Guilford County Main Courthouse, Guardian ad Litem offices in Greensboro, North Carolina (Western NC). These two groups comprised 15 individuals; 11 volunteers and four program staff; 9 females and 6 males; 10 Caucasians, 4 African Americans, and 1 Pacific Islander. The PI and a research assistant facilitated the groups. The meeting was audio taped and hand notes were taken by the research assistant.

The response to **Module One** was very positive and virtually all group participants wanted to view the next modules in the program (proposed for Phase II). Questions were posed to the group in relation to the actors, realistic representation of characters, narrator, and situation. In addition, a discussion centered on the DVD and the website ease of use. In the first group, three volunteers had used either the DVD or website as participants in the research study and four had not. In the second group, no one had seen either version. Both groups were shown the DVD and the online version (on a CD-ROM).

We learned that program administrative staffs wanted the capability to obtain feedback on volunteers' experiences in completing the module, and volunteers wanted more challenging questions. We developed Module One as an introduction to the nine modules planned for Phase II and felt that the questions for this module needed to be informational and not necessarily right or wrong choices. The study pre- and posttests were geared to knowledge gained. The narrator presented audio and rollover text. This led to a series of questions.

When a user “clicked” on an answer to a question, they were then taken to descriptive text related to the correct answer. This occurred no matter which of the three choices shown on the screen was chosen. Our intention for this module was to engage the user, present information that was related to each of the nine forthcoming modules, and provide general standards of practice as suggestions. This latter concept is very important for consideration in Phase II. The program must present national standards of practice and at the same time offer a realistic assessment of how differently child welfare and court systems utilize the standards from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, state to state, and county to county across the country. Examples of this approach in Module I were the points that youths should be allowed to be present in court for their own hearings, and whenever possible be called upon to speak on their own behalf. These are standards that are endorsed by many groups involved within juvenile and family courts in the US, yet there are many jurisdictions that do not allow youths to be present at their own hearings or to speak in court.

Overall, focus groups presented very reaffirming messages on the utility and need for the proposed program. We also learned very clearly that minority and gender representation in the volunteer population was limited (few non-Caucasians and mainly females). Our efforts to develop a program that visually presents a balance of minorities with majority groups can deliver a message that more individuals who are representative of minorities and males should be recruited to CASA and GAL programs nationally.

Results of Phase I Study

Both knowledge-gain information and client perception/satisfaction data were collected and analyzed during Phase I. All participants in Groups 1 and 2 were provided an opportunity to respond to a qualitative survey at the conclusion of the training-and-measurement (knowledge-gain) portion of the study. The purpose of the qualitative survey was to obtain participants feedback on a variety of questions: relating to ease of use of the training materials, the realism of the scripts and acted scenes, the mix of live/textual/narrated content, and so on. Due to time constraints, a single emailing of the survey was posted. Nine messages “bounced” due to respondents’ Spam-blocking software that could not be surmounted, and yet we had a 63% response rate to the survey. Results of the survey strongly endorse this introductory module and the methods of presentation of the material.

Of those responding, 96% said that the Web site and DVD were easy or very easy to use; and 92% found the acted scenes to be realistic or very realistic. Ninety percent of respondents indicated that they understood all of the material presented in the training, and the remaining 10% said they understood most of it. Only 22% offered comments about what should be changed; 83% said the pace of presented materials was about right, and 79% indicated that the balance of text and action was about right (10% thought there was too much text). Lastly, 92% of respondents found that the information in the module was appropriate or mostly appropriate for an introductory module on adolescents. Respondents offered many additional comments, and the information gathered from them will be used to make several revisions to Module 1 at the beginning of Phase II.

It is noteworthy that the initial effort to recruit volunteer subjects resulted in an excess of volunteers. Of those who at least entered the website to register, only 6% failed to finish the entire study, even among those in the control groups who knew they would not be able to view the training module until after all data from the study were collected. An attrition rate of 6% for this study compares extremely well to the typical attrition rate from distance education, typically estimated to range from 20% to 50% (Carr, 2000; Chronicle of Higher Education).

The research design for Phase I, relating to knowledge-gain, required four groups in order to test both within-group and between-group differences, and to control for possible effects of time, and of the pre-test as a performance variable. Chi-square analyses were conducted to test the equivalence of the randomly assigned groups with respect to demographic variables. An independent-samples, ANOVA was conducted across groups to test for comparability of the groups' pre-test scores, and matched-pairs t-tests were conducted within groups 1 through 3 to test for knowledge gained as a result of exposure to the training material. The most important research questions related to whether the two types of media material (Web-based or DVD-based) were effective at increasing participants' knowledge, and whether there was a difference in effectiveness between the two types. Other research questions were primarily "control" questions relating to time and the use of the pretest. The group sizes differed in order to increase power for the main research questions: Group 1, n = 44, received the pre-test and post-test, and the Web-based training material; Group 2, n = 45, received the pre-test and posttest, and the DVD-based materials; Group 3, n = 26, received the pre-test and post-test, but did not receive any training; and Group 4, n = 22, received the posttest only.

All four groups were included in the between-group Chi-square analyses of the following demographic variables: race, ethnicity, gender, highest education level attained, GAL experience (defined as both the total number of GAL cases served, and the number of GAL cases served in the preceding 12 months), number of previous GAL trainings received, number of previous trainings focusing on adolescents, and current employment status (i.e., unemployed, part-time, full-time, retired). There were no significant differences between the groups on any of the demographic/experience variables. There were slight trends indicating that Group 4 (post-test only, no treatment) was somewhat less educated than the other three groups, and that Group 3 (pre-test/post-test only, no treatment) had slightly more retirees than the other three groups, but the trends were not significant. Thus, the groups may be assumed to be equivalent, a priori, for purposes of testing the treatment and time effects.

In order to test for differences on the pre-test and post-test conditions, individual participants' scores on the tests were summed, yielding an index. The seven questions on the pre-test and post-test were identical, and each question employed a 7-point, Likert-type response scale. Thus, possible scale indices ranged from a low of 7 to a high of 49, with high indices indicating increased knowledge. A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the pre-test scores of Groups 1, 2 and 3, and Group 4 scores were also included in this analysis. Group 4

scores were obtained at the end of the study to control for time effects on the hypothesis that if Group 4 scores were higher than the pre-test scores for the other three groups, a possible time effect (or random intervening variable) might account for any increases in scores among the other three groups. There were no differences among the pretest scores of all groups ($F = 0.451$, $df = 3,133$, $p = .717$). Thus, all groups may be assumed to have been at equivalent levels of knowledge prior to training, and no random or intervening variable caused test scores to differ independent of training.

The independent variable, the instructional material in the training video, was designed to influence the dependent variable, knowledge gained, in one direction only. Therefore, a 1-tailed test was used, with alpha set at $p < .05$. The main effects of training and the educational value of taking the pre-test were examined using matched pairs t-tests within Groups 1, 2 and 3. The pre-test/post-test differences for Group 1 were statistically significant, using 1-tailed testing procedures ($t = 1.942$, $df = 43$, $p < .05$). Group 2 difference scores also were statistically significant ($t = 3.893$, $df = 44$, $p < .001$). Group 3 pre-test/post-test scores were not significantly different ($t = 0.516$, $df = 25$, $p = .611$), indicating that taking the pre-test had no effect on subsequent post-test scores in the absence of training.

The main effect of training, regardless of whether the training was Web-based or DVD-based, and the absence of any other between-group or within-group differences supports the efficacy of the training. It should be noted that although both the Group 1 and Group 2 differences are statistically significant, the mean differences between the pre-test and post-test scores was small. This was due to the pre-test scores being very high. The pre-test mean index for Group 1 was 38.5, and the post-test index was 39.7. For Group 2, the pre-test mean index was 37.4, and the post-test mean index was 40.2. We speculate that this is due, in part, to the very high average educational level attained by these study participants (71% were college graduates, or higher; 30% had masters, doctorates or professional degrees; and the remaining 29% were at least high school graduates, many of whom had some college or a 2-year associates degree). Recall that during the Focus Groups, participants suggested that the test questions needed to be more challenging. Thus, in Phase II, which covers 9 additional modules of training, there will be many more questions and the questions will be written at a more challenging level, which should increase the discriminability of the indices derived for pre-test and post-test conditions.

To summarize the statistical analyses of the Phase-1 study:

- The four study groups were equivalent on all demographic and experiential variables of interest;
- There were no significant differences attributable to group knowledge differences at pre-test;
- The pre-test was not instructional in the absence of training;
- No time effects or random variables affected pre-test knowledge when the pre-test was administered to experimentally naïve participants at the end of the study; and

- Main treatment effects attributable to training were significant (1-tailed) for both training-treatment groups, with differences noted in the expected direction, and with the magnitude of differences being somewhat attenuated by higher-than-expected pre-test scores (suspected to be due to high education levels of participants and test questions constructed at a level that was fairly easy for the participants).

Overall, the results of both the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the Phase I data are highly supportive of its effectiveness and its relevance to the intended users.