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Conducting the Needs Assessment #1: Introduction[1]

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Introduction to Needs Assessments

An integral step in the program development process is identifying the needs of a community. Formal and nonformal educators seeking to develop and deliver an educational program must first be informed of what their audience lacks in order to develop the right curriculum or training (Etling & Maloney, 1995). In addition to creating educational programs, the inclusion of a formal needs assessment can strengthen proposals for external funding (Angima, Etuk, & King, 2014).

This initial publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series provides Extension educators and other service providers who are interested in conducting a needs assessment with a brief introduction to the planning, implementation, and prioritization of the needs within a community or specific clientele group. This publication also provides an introduction and overview of the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series in Appendix A.

What is a needs assessment?

Before we define what a needs assessment is, we must first understand what a need is. A *need* is the "discrepancy or gap between 'what is' and 'what should be'" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 4). The "what is" is the current state, the "what should be" is the desired or expected outcome, and the gap is the identified need(s) (see Figure 1). Extension professionals must understand what needs to target with

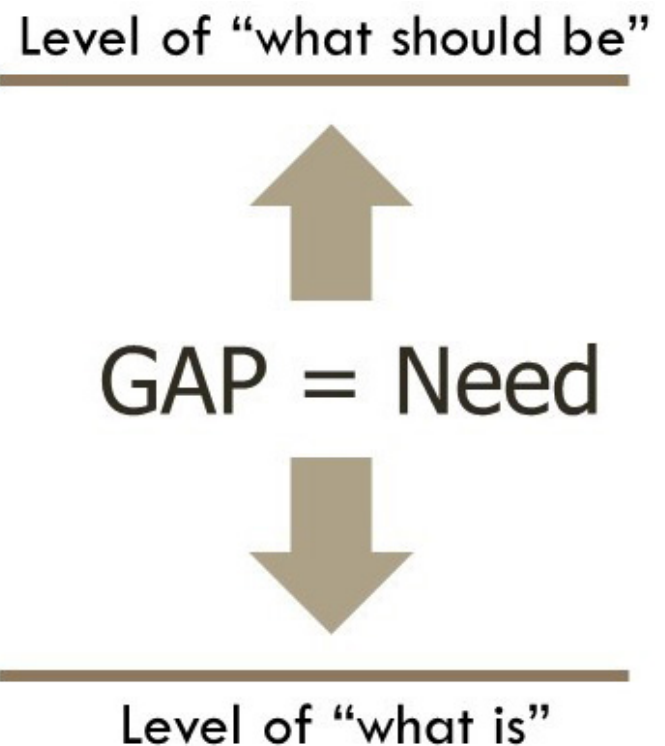educational programming in order to help achieve the desired situation (the "what should be").

Figure 1. The need is the gap between "what is" and "what should be."
Credits: Matt Benge, UF/IFAS

A needs assessment is "a systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources" (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995, p. 4). Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the key pieces of the definition.

Follow a specific set of procedures that have been proven to be both reliable and valid in fulfilling the objective.

Use the information learned to make informed decisions and establish priorities based on the need(s) identified.

A systematic set of procedures undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources.

Educational programs and outreach efforts should be created and implemented based on the true needs of the community or clientele.

Extension programs and organizations do not have an unlimited amount of resources, such as time, money, and materials. Resources should be appropriately allocated based on the determined priorities.
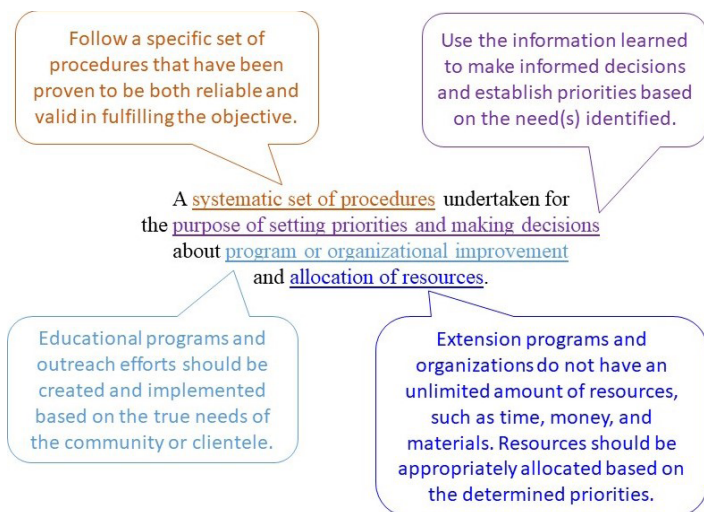
Figure 2. Operationalized definition of a needs assessment. Credits: Matt Benge, UF/IFAS

The Three Phases of the Needs Assessment

This *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series follows the Three-Phase Plan for Assessing Needs (see Figure 3). Each phase is laid out to guide the assessor through the entire needs assessment process (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The first phase, Pre-assessment, is exploratory by nature and seeks to help you prepare the needs assessment for implementation. Assessment is the second phase; data gathering and analysis occur here. During the last phase, Post-assessment, the Extension professional sets priorities, communicates results, and evaluates the needs assessment for effectiveness.

Barriers to Conducting Needs

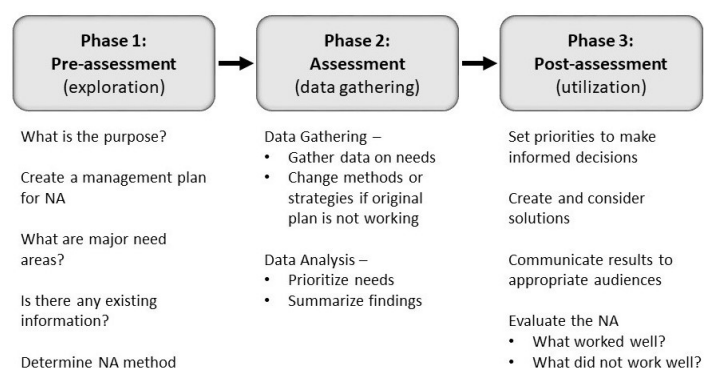| Phase 1: Pre-assessment (exploration)	Phase 2: Assessment (data gathering)	Phase 3: Post-assessment (utilization)
What is the purpose?	Data Gathering – • Gather data on needs • Change methods or strategies if original plan is not working	Set priorities to make informed decisions
Create a management plan for NA		Create and consider solutions
What are major need areas?	Data Analysis – • Prioritize needs • Summarize findings	Communicate results to appropriate audiences
Is there any existing information?		Evaluate the NA • What worked well? • What did not work well?
Determine NA method		

Figure 3. Three-phase plan for needs assessment adapted from Witkin and Altschuld (1995). Credits: Matt Benge, UF/IFAS

Assessments

Understanding motivations and barriers of both the assessor and the target community or clientele is instrumental throughout all three phases of the needs assessment (Donaldson & Franck, n.d.). There are many reasons why conducting a needs assessment is important, but there are just as many reasons why it can be difficult. Here is a common example an Extension professional might experience.

Situation: An Extension professional starts his/her job and is unable to find any documentation of identified needs for the past 20 years.

Potential issues and questions might include:

- I'm sure the program I'm designing is appropriate for my audience; why do I need to waste time on a needs assessment?

- Why can't I develop a program the way I want to?

- I have never conducted a needs assessment before. How do I get started?

- I am starting to gather information on needs and I'm finding that my clientele do not want to participate in a needs assessment. What do I do?

- I want to conduct a focus group, yet I'm concerned that some of my stakeholders that should be included are difficult to work with and think they know everything. Should I invite them to participate knowing they could be a problem?

- I have identified many needs in my area of responsibility and I'm concerned about my ability to address them.

- I met with my advisory board, and they didn't want me to do a needs assessment. They suggested I hit the ground running with programs instead. This has made me very busy and now I don't have time to conduct a needs assessment.

- I don't have enough money, personnel, or time to do a needs assessment.

Potential solutions to overcome barriers might include:

- Work with local leadership to establish buy-in for value of conducting a needs assessment.

- Keep your CED and DED in the loop, so they can help if issues arise.

- Ask PDEC for assistance.

- Review any existing by-laws for advisory councils or associations to be clear on what their role and function is in your area of responsibility.
- Ask for help from mentors and more experienced agents.

These are just a sample of issues, barriers, and solutions an Extension professional may encounter while conducting a needs assessment. Assessors can find it difficult to complete a needs assessment without taking potential barriers into account and may end up with incomplete information or none at all, which can lead to missed opportunities for effective programming and community change. Investing time into learning about needs assessment methods first will save you time later. More detailed information will be provided in subsequent publications in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series.

Needs Assessment Tools and Techniques

As mentioned earlier in this publication, the needs assessment should follow a systematic set of procedures. Using methods and protocols that have demonstrated high reliability and validity ensures the results of your own needs assessment are viable and trustworthy (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Both quantitative and qualitative tools and techniques exist, but be careful when determining which to use. Survey methods such as the Borich Model are useful when you already know the needs or set of skills required but aren't sure which to focus on first. Other methods such as interviews and the nominal group technique are useful when you do not have any determined or identified needs. The *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series provides a handful of proven tools and techniques with instructions and resources for conducting your own needs assessment.

Though every community has needs, Extension professionals may choose to focus on the assets and strengths of their communities. Asset Mapping is a tool that allows educators to "assess and mobilize what a community has" rather than what it lacks (Human Services Commission, 2013, p. 3). This technique: (1) uncovers resources found in a community; (2) relies on the assets within a community at a specific time; and (3) seeks to build linkages among local people, institutions, and organizations (Human Services Commission, 2013). Asset Mapping is not a needs assessment tool, but it provides Extension professionals an additional approach to better understand their community (Berkowitz & Wadud, 2018).

Summary

This initial publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series focused on introducing the topic, major concepts, and tools associated with the needs assessment process. Subsequent publications in this series will dive deeper into these topics to provide you the best practices and methods for conducting a usable and reliable needs assessment. For a brief overview of each publication in the series, see Appendix A.

References

Angima, S., Etuk, L., & King, L. (2014). Using needs assessment as a tool to strengthen funding proposals. *Journal of Extension, 52*(6). Retrieved from https://archives.joe.org/joe/2014december/tt1.php

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Appendix A: *Conducting the Needs Assessment* Series Overview

Conducting the Needs Assessment #1: Introduction

General summary of needs assessments, including what a needs assessment is, the different phases, and tools to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #2: Using Needs Assessments in Extension Programming

Overview of using needs assessments as part of the Extension program planning process.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #3: Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections to conducting needs assessments for Extension professionals and service providers.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #4: Audience Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections that clientele and communities may have for participating or buying-in to a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #5: Phase 1 —Pre-assessment

Introduction to the Pre-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including defining the purpose, management, identifying existing information, and determining the appropriate methods.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #6: Phase 2 —Assessment

Introduction to the Assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including gathering and analyzing all data.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #7: Phase 3 —Post-assessment

Introduction to the Post-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including setting priorities, considering solutions, communicating results, and evaluating the needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #8: The Borich Model

Overview of using the Borich Model to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #9: The Nominal Group Technique

Overview of using the Nominal Group Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #10: The Delphi Technique

Overview of using the Delphi Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #11: The Causal Analysis Technique

Overview of using the Causal Analysis Technique to conduct a needs assessment.