Conducting A Community Needs Assessment:
Primary Data Collection Techniques[1]

Keith A. Carter and Lionel J. Beaulieu[2]

The concept of community needs assessment connotes a process by which as assessment of the current situation in the community is undertaken, value-based judgements regarding the preferred or desired situation are reached, and some determination of the priority status of local needs is made. As noted in the IFAS Leadership Development Program publication *Needs Assessment: A Framework for Identifying Community Needs*, the accurate appraisal of the current situation is an important element in this process. In most instances, this entails the collection of first-hand information from relevant audiences. The present publication details five procedures which have enjoyed much success as primary data collection techniques. The purpose, approach, and method of implementation of each approach are outlined, as well as some of the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the respective techniques.

FIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

Five commonly utilized approaches for gathering new information on the needs of community residents are presented in this paper. The are: (1) the key informant approach; (2) the public forum approach; (3) the nominal group process technique; (4) the Delphi technique; and (5) the survey approach. Each represents a unique method for gathering information on the concerns of citizens. Which technique should you use in your needs assessment activities? As Butler and Howell (1980:4) note:

The quality of information about a community is only as good as the technique or combination of techniques used. A single technique may be too narrow in the information it provides; using too many methods may be costly in terms of time and dollars. Different techniques are appropriate for different needs. Analyze the situation and the most significant questions being asked, then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of several techniques. Sometimes a combination of several techniques will provide a reasonable picture...

Re-examination of the "needs assessment process" outlined in the IFAS Leadership Development Series report on *Needs Assessment: A Framework of Determining Community Needs* may prove helpful at this juncture. It presents a logically arranged, step-by-step procedure for conducting a needs assessment. For example, the "needs assessment process" includes careful attention to the purpose of the study, as well as determination of whose needs are to be assessed. These two steps by themselves can help guide you in the selection of a primary data collection technique(s).

Of course, the financial, human, and other anticipated resource requirements associated with the technique should be taken into consideration as well.

KEY INFORMANT APPROACH

Purpose

To collect information from those community residents who, because of their professional training and/or affiliation with particular organizations, agencies, or associations, are in a prime position to

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know what the needs facing the community are likely to be.

Approach

A brief interview or survey is conducted by one or more sponsoring organizations, agencies, or associations, and administered to community residents identified as "key informants." The data derived from these procedures can be used by the sponsoring group to obtain a more comprehensive viewpoint of what the needs facing the public are. After the data from the questionnaires or interviews are collected and organized, the sponsoring group may want to "feed back" the findings of the survey to the key informants who participated. In this way, the sponsoring group may help stimulated additional insights into public needs.

Types of Key Informants

* Elected officials (e.g., mayors, commissioners, etc.)

* Key persons in institutional areas of the community (e.g., religious leaders, bankers, public safety officials, school administrators, hospital administrators, etc.)

* Agency administrators (e.g., social service department)

* Leaders of public service organizations (e.g., Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis Club)

* Professionals in specific service areas (e.g., physicians, lawyers, school faculty, etc.)

How to Implement the Key Informant Approach

1. Compile a list of "key informants" by name.

2. Decide how you want to collect information from these key informants—via questionnaires, interviews, or meetings (perhaps all).

3. Construct a brief questionnaire and/or interview form which can be used to obtain the information you need.

4. Gather data.

5. Organize data.

6. Interpret data.

7. Schedule a meeting with key informants. Present the findings of your study to them. Discuss your interpretations and their interpretations of the data.

The instrument administered to key informants should contain questions that will successfully elicit the type of information needed to identify community needs. From our vantage point, this might include the following types of questions: (1) the key informant's perceptions (or attitudes) of general community needs, or needs that might exist within specific areas of the community (e.g., the local economy, public education, or health services); (2) his/her perceptions (or attitudes) concerning what is currently being done about meeting those needs; and (3) his/her ideas as to what should be done about resolving needs that remain unmet. As a means of ensuring that a good cross-section of key informants comprises your study, it might be useful to also include questions concerning the background characteristics of key informants (e.g., age sex, race, community of residence).

Advantages

1. One of the easiest and least expensive ways to systematically assess needs.

2. Opportunity to establish rapport and trust and thus obtain the insiders' view.

3. Depth of information concerning causes of reasons.

4. Permits continual clarification of ideas and information.

5. Can be combined effectively with other techniques.

6. Permits input from many individuals with different perspectives on the needs of the community.

7. Can be implemented by community volunteers, thereby building citizen involvement and awareness.

8. Does not involve the high cost of printing and data analysis.

9. May help initiate (or strengthen) the lines of communication on among service organizations, agencies, and associations.

10. Discussion of the findings with the key informants promotes insights for all concerned.

11. The data collection instruments are usually easier to construct than those associated with the Survey Approach.

Disadvantages

1. The information derived from this technique may represent a "biased perspective": information is typically elicited from "providers of services" (as opposed to the "consumers" of services).

2. The information derived from key informants often represents the perspectives (and biases) of the organization, agencies, and associations with which these informants are associated.

3. A group meeting held to "feed back" the findings of the study to the key informants may only work to rigidify a "provider" bias in terms of clarifying what the real needs are.

4. Personal relationships between researchers and informants may influence type of data obtained.

5. Jealousies and resentment on the part of other community members whose opinions are not solicited may develop.

6. Should be combined with other methods, because representativeness of total community is difficult to achieve.

7. Few people can sense all the needs and concerns of all people in a community—the perspectives of those who are less visible may be overlooked.

An Optional Approach

One of the weaknesses associated with the traditional key informant approach is the persons identified as "key" may not always hold formal positions in the community, nor may they wield a substantial amount of power and influence.

The "expanded key informant approach" is designed to capture some of those individuals who may be omitted using the traditional approach but who occupy positions of leadership in the community.

One method that can be used to identify these people is to select five individuals who hold official positions in the community (e.g., county/city commissioner, city manager, business leader). Ask each of these persons the following concerning the issue(s) which is (are) being considered:

> Please name five to ten individuals who you feel are knowledgeable about this (these) issue(s) in this community.

Compile the list of persons mentioned. Take the most frequently mentioned persons on the list and ask them to complete the same questionnaire or interview that the key informants (who hold formal positions of authority) have been asked to complete. (In some cases, key informants holding formal positions will also appear on this latter list.)

If time and resources permit, ask these persons to identify the five to ten people who they believe are most knowledgeable about the issue or issues in question.

You will notice that at some point along the line, an increasing number of repeat selections will appear on your list. You can stop the process at this point and ask the most frequently mentioned persons to respond to the key informant questionnaire or interview.

THE PUBLIC-FORUM APPROACH

Purpose

To elicit information from a wide range of community residents concerning issues and community needs via group discussion taking place at a series of public meetings.

Approach

One or more organizations, agencies, or associations sponsor a series of public meetings (forums) during which time the participants discuss what some of the needs facing the community are, what some of the priority needs are, and what can be done about these priority needs.

Who Should Attend Forums?

Open invitation (encourage all members of the community to attend).

Special invitation to "key informants," such as those types previously considered under the Key Informant Approach.

How to Implement the Public Forum Approach

1. Develop a list of discussion questions that will serve as the basis for group discussion.

    Such questions as:

    * What are the most important needs facing our community?

    * Why are these important needs?

    * What have we done to help meet these needs in the past?

    * Where have we failed in the past in our attempt to meet these needs?

    are broad enough, yet pertinent, so that most community residents (and those participating at the forums) should feel free to address the issues without too much difficulty. However, public forums are probably most useful where specific issues and needs are being addressed.

2. Select a *strategically located place* for the initial meeting. Try to select a meeting place that you feel will be conducive to the open interchange of ideas. Large assembly halls, for example, are not usually the most appropriate settings for open discussion. Also, select a site that is *geographically* and *socially* acceptable to all segments of the population.

3. Publicize the purpose, data, and place at which the forum will be held. Use the media as much as possible.

4. The group sponsoring the initial forum should take the initiative in conducting the first meeting. A person representing the group should be responsible for communication the purpose of the forum to those present and what the meeting hopes to accomplish. Another person representing the sponsoring group should be responsible for recording ideas and suggestions presented at the meeting.

5. After stating the purpose, objective, and "ground rules' for the initial forum, the discussion leader should pose the questions prepared in advance to the audience. Encourage the open discussion and interchange of ideas.

6. If the participants are on the right track, you'll find the recommendations for topics to consider and/or directions to consider for possible next meetings will "come from the floor." If this occurs, the convener should make sure an "ad hoc" committee of participants is organized to plan for the next meeting.

7. Make sure the recorder gets the names of all the participants so they may be personally contacted prior to the next forum.

8. Recognize that unlike the other needs-assessment approaches discussed thus far, you'll probably need to "play it by ear" more with the Public Forum Approach. Be well prepared for the initial meeting. Then let the participants join with you in planning for future meetings. Your goal is to learn from them by permitting them to get involved in the needs assessment process.

Advantages

1. Offers a good way to elicit opinions from a wide range of the citizenry.

2. Provides an opportunity for citizens to actively participate in the needs assessment process.

3. Participants in the forums may offer able assistance to decision makers after the needs assessment process is completed.

4. Often contributes to enhancing the lines of communication between the "providers" and "consumers" of services and programs.

5. Perhaps the least expensive of all the systematic needs assessment approaches. It is also one of the easiest to implement.

6. Can provide a quick, intensive picture of community concerns.

7. Gives community issues broad visibility.

8. Useful to identify problems, assess needs, or to suggest questions requiring further study.

9. Design is flexible—a variety of techniques can be incorporated.

Disadvantages

1. The burden will be squarely on the sponsoring organizations, agencies, or associations to encourage participation.

2. Require good leadership and advance organization.

3. Opinions obtained are limited to those who attend—all viewpoints may not be heard.

4. Participants in the forums may actually represent a variety of "vested interest" groups.

5. Poor advance planning and advertising may result in limited participation.

6. Participants in forums may use the sessions as a vehicle to publicize their grievances ("gripes") about local organizations or agencies.

7. If not well-facilitated, only the vocal minorities will be heard.

8. A large turnout may prevent everyone from speaking and may limit time allowed for each speaker.

9. May generate more questions than answers.

10. The forums may bring about unrealistic expectations in the minds of the participants in terms of what "providers" can do to help meet needs.

THE NOMINAL GROUP PROCESS APPROACH

Purpose

An idea generating strategy to gather individual's ideas in a face-to-face non-threatening situations.

Approach

The nominal group process is intended to maximize creative participation of group members. Input from all participants is required. The process takes advantage of each person's knowledge and experience. This approach is useful in generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, prioritizing, and making decisions on alternative actions.

How to Implement the Nominal Group Process Approach

There are many variations in using the nominal groups process. The following steps outline one general approach to using the process:

1. If a large number of participants are involved, divide participants into small groups of 6 to 20 persons.

2. Members of the group write their individuals ideas on paper.

3. Each person discusses his/her ideas and all concerns are listed on a chart or board.

4. Each idea is discussed, clarified, and evaluated by the group.

5. Each person assigns priorities by silent ballot.

6. Group priorities are tallied.

7. Discussion of final group priorities.

Advantages

1. If well-organized in advance, a heterogeneous group can move toward definite conclusions.

2. Can be used to expand the data obtained from surveys or existing documents, or can be used to generate a more specific survey.

3. Motivates all participants to get involved because they sense they are personally affected.

4. Generates many ideas in a short period of time; allows for a full range of individuals' thoughts and concerns.

5. A good way to obtain input from people of different backgrounds and experiences.

6. Gives all participants an equal opportunity to express opinions and ideas in a non-threatening setting.

7. Stimulates creative thinking and effective dialogue.

8. Allow for clarification of ideas.

Disadvantages

1. May be extremely difficult to implement with large audiences unless advance preparation has taken place to train group facilitators and divide participants into groups of 6 to 10 members

2. Process may appear rigid if group leader does not show flexibility—encourage agenda building, and show respect for all ideas and concerns.

3. May be some overlap of ideas due to unclear wording or inadequate group discussion.

4. "Knowledgeable" individuals selected to participate may not represent all community subgroups.

5. Assertive personalities may dominate unless leadership skills are exercised.

6. May not be a sufficient source of data in itself; may require follow-up survey, observations or documentary analysis.

THE DELPHI TECHNIQUE

Purpose

An idea-generating strategy that does not require face-to-face interaction, although it also can be used in small groups or workshop setting.

Approach

The Delphi technique is more structured than the nominal group process and uses a series of questionnaires and summarized feedback reports from preceding responses.

This approach is useful for many of the same things as the nominal group process: generating and clarifying ideas, reaching consensus, prioritizing, and making decisions on alternative actions. Since face-to-face interaction is not a requirement, the Delphi technique could be used with groups that would not ordinarily meet together.

How to Implement the Delphi Technique

Many variations of the Delphi technique can be designed. The following steps outline a general approach for using the Delphi technique:

1. Develop a questionnaire focusing on identified issues: problems, causes, solutions, actions. The intent is for each respondent to list ideas regarding the specified issue.

2. Distribute the questionnaire to an appropriate group of respondents.

3. Each respondent independently generates ideas in answering the questions and returns the questionnaires.

4. Summarize the questionnaires into a feedback report and develop a second questionnaire for the same respondent group. The second questionnaire should ask respondents to prioritized or rank input from the first round.

5. Distribute feedback summary and second questionnaire.

6. Respondents review feedback report, independently rate priority ideas in second questionnaire, and return response.

7. This process is repeated until general agreement is reached on problems, causes, solutions, and actions.

8. A final summary and feedback report is prepared and distributed to respondents. The feedback reports throughout this process allow for the exchange of opinions and priorities, and often result in individual changes in opinions and priorities after respondents evaluate the general groups perspectives.

Advantages

1. Allows participants to remain anonymous.

2. Inexpensive.

3. Free of social pressure, personality influence, and individual dominance.

4. Allows sharing of information and reasoning among participants.

5. Conducive to independent thinking and gradual formulation.

6. A well-selected respondent panel—a mix of local officials, knowledgeable individuals, citizens of the community, regional official, academic social scientists, etc.—can provide a broad analytical perspective on local problems and concerns.

7. Can be used to reach consensus among groups hostile to each other.

Disadvantages

1. Judgements are those of a selected group of people and may not be representative.

2. Tendency to eliminate extreme positions and force a middle-of-the-road consensus.

3. More time-consuming than the nominal group process.

4. Should not be viewed as a total solution.

5. Requires skill in written communication.

6. Requires adequate time and participant commitment (about 30 to 45 days to complete the entire process).

THE SURVEY APPROACH

Purpose

To collect information from a wide range of community residents concerning issues and community needs via their responses to specific questions included in an interview schedule or questionnaire.

Approach

Information (data) is gathered through a *carefully developed* instrument administered to individuals identified via a *sampling procedure*.

Basic Requirements

At least some training or experience in the construction of survey instruments is recommended for this approach (e.g., writing clear and precise questions).

At least some training or experience in sampling techniques is recommended (e.g., some consideration should be given to selecting the most appropriate sampling design given the nature of the study).

Some Types of Surveys

*   Personal (face-to-face) interviews

*   Personal distribution and collection

*   Self administered questionnaires completed by respondents in groups

*   Telephone interviews

*   Mailed questionnaires

The three types of surveys can often by compared in terms of: (1) cost of implementation; (2) time needed for completion; (3) rate of refusal; and (4) the extent and type of training needed by supporting staff.

Advantages

1. Perhaps the best approach for eliciting the attitudes of a *broad range* of individuals.

2. The data obtained are usually valid and reliable.

3. Techniques—mail survey, telephone survey, personal interview, drop-off and pick-up survey—may be selected in relation to desired cost or response rate.

4. Can be used to survey an entire population and provide an opportunity for many persons to feel involved in the decision-making process.

5. Secures information from individuals who may be the recipients of services initiated as a result of the findings, thereby eliciting data from individuals who are usually in a good position of critique present services.

6. Can be used to record behaviors as well as opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs.

7. An excellent technique to use in conjunction with other systematic needs assessment techniques.

Disadvantages

1. This approach is often the most costly.

2. To ensure statistical meaning, samples must be carefully selected.

3. Results may not be valid if survey is not designed correctly.

4. May require time and expertise to develop the survey, train interviewers, conduct interviews, and analyze results.

5. Is subject to misinterpretation depending on how the questions and response categories are designed.

6. Tendency for scope of data to be limited—omission of underlying reasons, and actual behavioral patterns.

7. Individuals sometimes hesitant to answer questions. Individuals who do answer questions sometimes answer them in the most desirable way (i.e., perhaps their answers represent what they think the authors want to hear, not necessarily how the respondents really feel. This is a problem particularly with interviews.)

8. Surveys are often "one shot" affairs. For example, persons responding to a needs survey may not be resurveyed again in the future.

9. Individuals' attitudes can change rapidly. Attitudes can change due to a variety of "intervening factors."

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to provide information on the most commonly employed techniques for gathering primary data from community members. It is hoped that the extensive discussion of each method's purpose, procedures, advantages and disadvantages, will serve as a guide in the selection of an appropriate technique for the collection of first-hand information on local needs. for most needs assessment activities, these techniques can be successfully used in concert with one another. For example, the "key informant" and "nominal group" approaches can be employed to generate the types of questions to be included in a formal survey of the community. Of course, the approach(es) selected will ultimately be based on the nature and extent of information needed by your group to assess the "current situation," as well as the level of resources available for securing such information. Nonetheless, with a better understanding of primary data collection techniques, it is likely that your group will select a strategy that will work for you.

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The materials presented in this publication were adapted from the following sources:

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