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

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Introduction to the Pre-assessment Phase of the Needs Assessment

This is the fifth publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series. The pre-assessment phase, also known as the exploration phase, of conducting a needs assessment includes defining the purpose, identifying existing information, and determining the appropriate methods to conducting the needs assessment. Extension professionals and service providers should complete the pre-assessment phase prior to conducting the actual needs assessment.

What is the pre-assessment?

The purpose of the pre-assessment phase is to (a) investigate what is already known about the needs of the target group, (b) determine the focus and scope of the assessment, and (c) gain commitment for all stages of the assessment, including the use of findings for program planning and implementation (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The pre-assessment phase also provides the beginning stages of collecting the most appropriate data sources for the foundational understanding of the target group and their community. Extension professionals and service providers should be able to define the purpose of the needs assessment, create a management plan, identify major areas of need, gather preexisting information, and determine the appropriate needs assessment approach (see Figure 1).

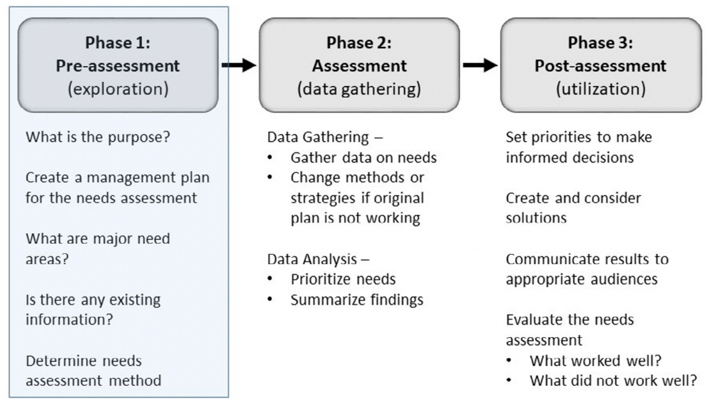

Figure 1. Three-phase plan for needs assessment adapted from Witkin and Altschuld (1995).

Defining the Purpose

The first step for any needs assessment process should be to define the purpose, or scope, of the assessment (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). An Extension professional or organization should first determine the target group for the assessment, such as community members, clientele, or stakeholders. Once a target group has been decided upon, the leader of the assessment can assemble an advisory team (if they so choose), identify potential areas of need, identify preexisting data and information, and select the appropriate needs assessment strategy.

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Creating a Management Plan

Managing the needs assessment process is critical to ensuring its success. A good management plan identifies a set of specific tasks, when each is to be completed, and who is responsible. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) suggests many instances where managing the needs assessment process might come into play, such as ensuring the needs assessment is proceeding in a timely fashion, making adjustments to the process timeline, and communicating clearly at every stage in the needs assessment process (both within the needs assessment team and within the actual needs assessment).

Additionally, if a team rather than an individual conducts the needs assessment, it is important to create buy-in and ensure every team member has a voice. Here are some important questions that need to be answered if the needs assessment is a team effort:

- Is an individual or a group on the team taking lead on the needs assessment? If a group will make the decisions, the team needs to determine a mutual agreement as to how decisions will be made or vote upon.
- Will the entire team have access to the data? If so, how and where will the data be stored so that everyone has access?
- Who on the team will be monitoring, or conducting periodic checks, to ensure the assessment is proceeding on time?

Identifying the Major Areas of Need and Gathering Preexisting Information

Identifying the major areas of need and gathering preexisting information related to the needs of your community is a crucial step in the program development process (Futris & Schramm, 2015). Extension professionals and service providers can sometimes "jump the gun" when hired and start implementing educational programs without understanding what their community actually needs. Often times data already exists to help inform what some needs are, identify target audiences, and locate previously conducted programs and assessment information (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Information can be found both internal and external to the organization to help guide Extension professionals and service providers to gather preexisting data.

Internal Data Sources

Internal data sources are located from within the organization (Johns & Scalia, n.d.). Whether new to the organization or trying to create or revamp a new educational program, locating information from within the organization is an easy way to begin gathering already existing data (Caillouet et al., 2020).

- *Plans of work and annual reports*—Plans of work and annual reports are great data sources because they provide a snapshot of what conditions are currently being improved and the outcomes of those conditions being met. Specifically for Extension professionals, county, state, and federal plans of work and reports are available to gather preexisting data.
- *Past needs assessments*—Has a needs assessment relating to the topic of interest been conducted previously? If so, it would provide valuable insight into what the community's needs are, and you may not need to conduct a new needs assessment. If not, then you know for certain that a needs assessment is needed.
- *Colleagues*—Your colleagues can be a good source to determine what some of the needs are and whether a needs assessment has already been conducted in your specified area. Speaking with colleagues and professional peers who know the position can be a helpful source of information.
- *Program reviews*—The purpose of program reviews is to assist organizations in their efforts to plan and deliver high-quality programs for their clientele. Program reviews can be beneficial in identifying gaps in programs, resources, and outcome data.
- *Program evaluation data*—Sometimes a previous employee has evaluation data from their programs available for you. Evaluation data can provide insight into potential needs and previously targeted outcomes to enhance the community.
- *Customer satisfaction surveys*—The purpose of the customer satisfaction survey is to gather data on suggested improvements within UF/IFAS Extension, such as changes to existing programs, new topics, and new services (see, for example, Israel & Henderson, 2018). This data can be important if community members feel new topics or changes are needed for previous or current programming within the community.
- *AskIFAS publications*—AskIFAS publications are very useful for Extension professionals to review the articles that may be related to their community's past programs,

research trials, and resources available for the specific community.

- *Advisory committees (internal)*—Advisory committees are a good place to start gathering preliminary data or information because they have meeting agendas and minutes. They can also assist with designing procedures and instruments and provide general direction and support for the needs assessment.

External Data Sources

External data sources are located outside of your organization (Walters, n.d.). After you have exhausted your internal data sources, begin to locate important sources of information outside of your organization. You might find the external sources corroborate the information you found internally, it might rebut the information you found internally, or it might be new information to consider.

- *Advisory committees (external) and other organizations*—Advisory committees outside of the professional's organization can provide meaningful information, because members themselves represent the broader community and serve as knowledgeable informants. Outside organizations such as education associations, health centers, and NGOs may be willing to share meeting minutes and other information that can be useful. Some of these same organizations may have already completed a needs assessment on the given topic.
- *US Census*—The US Census Bureau's mission is to serve as the nation's leading provider of quality data about its people and economy. To search for data, use this link: https://data.census.gov/cedsci/. The US Census has numerous how-to videos available for data users who want an easy way to enhance their knowledge of Census data. Topics include (a) how to select your area to access data, (b) how to customize and download tables, and (c) how to visualize data for your area.
- *Enterprise Florida Inc. (EFI)*—Enterprise Florida Inc. (EFI) is the principal economic development organization for the state of Florida. It forges strong partnerships, not only between business and government, on state and local levels. https://www.enterpriseflorida.com/data-center/
- *Florida Economic Development Council (FEDC)*—Council members are experts in economics and community development. FEDC educates, advocates for, and connects Florida's economic development professionals. https://fedconline.org/about/purpose/
- *Department of Education*—One goal of the Department of Education (DoE) is to collect data on America's schools and disseminate research. The DoE can provide youth development workers insight into some of the needs of school-age children in their communities, such as underrepresented STEM programs and lack of nutrition programs. Additionally, located within the DoE is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which collects and analyzes data of both US and international education systems. Some examples of NCES data include national household education and employment data. Using the NCES search engine, you can even look for information specific to an individual school or for the entire public school district within your community. For specific information about the Florida Department of Education, please see https://edudata.fldoe.org/index.html.
- *Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS)*—The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services supports and promotes Florida agriculture, protects the environment, safeguards consumers, and ensures the safety and wholesomeness of food. https://www.fdacs.gov/
- *National Association of Counties & Florida Association of Counties*—The mission of the National Association of Counties (NAC) is to strengthen American counties. The Florida Association of Counties (FAC) seeks to provide advocacy and education to Florida's county government officials. Both the NAC and FAC provide county-specific information, information of advocacy and lobbying, and local and statewide initiatives that can impact Extension programming.
- *Centers for Disease Control Social Vulnerability Index*—The purpose of this index is to help public health officials and emergency response planners identify communities that will most likely need support before, during, or after a hazardous event (e.g., hurricanes, tornadoes, disease outbreak, etc.). This link is to an interactive map. The index is created from four different categories: (a) socioeconomic status, (b) household composition and disability, (c) minority status and language, and (d) housing and transportation. https://svi.cdc.gov/map.html
- *USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service*—The National Agricultural Statistics Service provides timely, accurate, and useful statistics in service to US agriculture. https://www.nass.usda.gov/

Determining the Needs Assessment Method Based on the Preliminary Data

Once the preliminary data has been collected, the educator must now assess the quality of information gathered. If there is not enough information from the preexisting data gathered to make an informed decision on the direction of education programs or services, then a needs assessment would be needed in order to appropriately provide educational programs and services to the community. To determine what kind of technique will be used to conduct the needs assessment, consider these questions: (a) What is the purpose of the needs assessment? (b) Who is the target audience? (c) What technique may be best received by the target audience? There are many approaches to conducting a needs assessment, and the data gathered in Phase 1 can help identify the type of approach best suited for the needs assessment in Phase 2. For instance, if you have a complete a list of needs, then you would choose a quantitative approach and use a survey to gather data. If you do not have an exhaustive list of needs or information, you might choose a qualitative approach such as a focus group or nominal group technique. More information on the types of needs assessments are available in other articles in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series.

Summary

This fifth publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series focused on the pre-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including defining the purpose, management, identifying existing information, and determining the appropriate methods. 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.

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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.