Identifying Key Community Leaders to Assess Extension Programming Needs[1]

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Summary

Needs and assets assessments are a key task for Extension agents because they aid the development and delivery of research-based programs that address local needs. *Needs* are the difference between the present and the desired conditions (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Israel & Gouldthorpe, 2013). Needs assessment should be one of the first priorities of a new agent and should be an ongoing process (Caravella, 2006). "It is imperative that adult educators thoroughly understand the needs concept if they are to function effectively" (Boone et al., 2002, p. 12). Extension agents should have their needs assessment planning set up by the end of the first year, and they should be experts in designing programs that meet community needs after about one and a half to three years in the position (Place & Higgins, 2009). This is also the time to identify *assets*, or strengths that a community offers (Israel & Gouldthorpe, 2013). There are numerous data collection approaches that can be used in needs and assets assessments for Extension planning. These approaches include observation, audience self-reporting, surveys, focus groups, secondary data, advisory committees, and interviews with key leaders (Caravella, 2006; Gouldthorpe & Israel, 2013; Israel & Gouldthorpe, 2013). **The purpose of this article is to describe the process of identifying key leaders to support an Extension agent's needs assessment activities through interviews.**

It is not likely that Extension agents can interview every individual in their counties. Connecting with one's target audience "requires that adult educators, as change agents, identify closely with the formal and informal leadership of that [audience]" (Boone et al., 2002, p. 132). As such, it may be necessary for Extension agents to consult with key leaders to determine the real needs of their target audience. *Key leaders* are individuals who guide their communities either formally or informally (Boone et al., 2002). *Formal leaders* are those who hold positions of authority; *informal leaders* may not hold specific positions of power, but are well-respected and have great influence over practices and decisions within the community. Both types of leaders can provide valuable insight into the needs of the target audience.

Methods for Identifying Leaders

Prior to identifying leaders, agents should outline the general topics of focus for their programming and needs assessments. This may be done using a combination of agents' area of assignment, such as horticulture or agriculture, and their existing knowledge about local needs, which can be readily accessed through public records and data. It is a good idea to consider using a team to collectively identify and interview key leaders, as well as analyze and interpret data throughout the interview process.

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There are five primary methods for identifying leaders in the community: (a) positional approach, (b) reputational approach, (c) opinion leadership approach, (d) decision-making approach, and (e) social participation approach (Boone et al., 2002). These methods are summarized below.

- *Positional approach*—this method identifies leaders who are in positions of authority. Using this approach, an Extension agent identifies people who make key decisions in local organizations such as political groups, churches, schools, social organizations, government entities, and financial institutions. Sources of information include organizational charts and local government meeting minutes.
- *Reputational approach*—this method uses members of the target audience to identify well-informed members of the community who should be engaged. When using this approach, an agent first identifies people who are knowledgeable about their community, and then asks them questions such as "Who does this community look to when an important decision needs to be made?" or "Who would you choose to make a decision that would affect this community?" The source of this information is knowledgeable people in the target audience.
- *Opinion leadership approach*—this method identifies leaders who set examples in the community. These are leaders who may not hold formal positions but have high levels of social participation and social status, as well as great levels of exposure to mass media. Opinion leaders are identified when people who are part of the community are asked "Where do you look for advice and information?" The source of this information is the people in the target audience.
- *Decision-making approach*—this method identifies leaders who are actively participating in formal decision-making in the community. Sources of this information could be public records, meeting minutes, interviews, and public media sources.
- *Social participation approach*—this method identifies leaders through their participation in voluntary organizations in the community. The source of this information is membership and administrative rosters for various social and service organizations that are active in a particular community.

Extension agents should employ a combination of the positional approach with at least one of the other key leader identification methods in order to identify real needs (Boone et al., 2002). The second approach can be selected through the judgment and creativity of the Extension agent. For example, an Extension agent might make two lists of leaders: the first using the positional approach, and the second using the reputational approach. The leaders that emerge on both lists would constitute the sample for the needs assessment. Agents should use a combination of approaches to ensure that they have a sample that is pluralistic and therefore more likely to yield the information required to identify the needs that are relevant to a larger proportion of their clientele.

Extension agents should note that there is a risk of missing underrepresented audiences when using key leader approaches. Agents need to directly seek out key leaders from underrepresented audiences, because they are not likely to be mentioned by members of the majority groups in the community.

Determining the Number of Leaders to Approach

Interviewing is one of the oldest, and probably the most commonly used, data collection methods in systematic social studies (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Kvale, 2007). When conducting qualitative research, such as interviews, the sample size is not generally established prior to conducting research (Dooley, 2007). The goal when collecting this type of data is to reach a point of recurrence, known as *data saturation* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, when additional interviews fail to reveal new information, the interviewer knows that he/she has approached enough key leaders. In this particular case, it is more important to know *who* should be interviewed rather than *how many* interviewees to include; make sure that you are including the voices of the different types of leaders that you identified using a combination of approaches. There is also a consideration for how many people may be practically approached given time and logistical considerations. However, when the right leaders are selected, the number needed to reach saturation will be relatively low. Once you have selected your sample, you can contact the key leaders via mail, e-mail, or phone to invite them to participate by explaining the purpose and objectives of the needs assessment, why they were selected to participate, and how the results will be used to inform program development.

Deciding What to Ask

It is outside the scope of this document to address the types of questions that should be asked of key leaders. Much of this is dependent on the Extension professional's area of focus and community attributes. Some good sources to help in designing an interview guide and planning the interview sessions include the following documents:

- Conducting an In-Depth Interview (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy393)
- Determining Program Priorities (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc105)
- Using Focus Group Interviews for Planning or Evaluating Programs (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pd036)
- Using Sondeos for Program Development and Evaluation (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc067)

Selecting an Interview Method

Just as it is important to identify the right people to approach, it is important to select an appropriate method for collecting interview data. Decisions regarding which is the best method to use in a particular situation will be influenced by multiple factors: the characteristics of participants, availability of resources (money, time, labor, technology, etc.), an agent's expertise, or others. For example, according to Glesne (1999), the most important factor in setting up interviews is participants' accessibility needs, as their willingness to be interviewed is contingent on how convenient it is for them to participate. Scheduling interviews at times and locations that are convenient for participants and including additional services to make them feel more comfortable (e.g., providing snacks and beverages, babysitting, etc.) may enhance participation. Generally, it is most appropriate to choose a comfortable, private location to create a good environment for the interview (Glesne, 1999).

There are numerous methods available for interviewing key leaders. Interviews can be conducted in person, over the phone, and through video conferencing. They may be synchronous or asynchronous. In-person interviews are often preferred, as they encourage cooperation and allow the researcher to experience the participant's body language and unspoken cues. Additionally, personal interviews allow the researcher to build rapport with the key leader (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Personal interviews may not be preferred when excessive costs or travel would be necessary, or when the participant requests another method. In this case, telephone or video interviews may be preferable.

Group interviews, like focus groups or social interviews, will help an agent to uncover additional data along with what each respondent might have said on their own. A focus group format encourages participants to listen to others' views and explore their own views about a topic (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Other types of group methods, like the Nominal Group technique (Sample, 1984) or the Delphi method (Geist, 2009), may also be appropriate to use for conducting needs assessments with key leaders.

Generally, most interviews will be conducted synchronously, but some may be conducted asynchronously. Asynchronous interviews are conducted through recorded video, audio, or through e-mail exchange. Asynchronous interviews can be conducted without a substantial investment in time or travel, and are appropriate when subjects are located at a great distance from the researcher or when personal schedules prohibit a traditional interview approach.

There are many comprehensive resources available for selecting an interview method. Data may be recorded by hand, which can be less obtrusive to many respondents, or it may be electronically recorded (Glesne, 1999). Whichever method of recording data is selected, it is important to keep detailed, accurate records. To ensure accuracy and trustworthiness, an Extension agent should record any pertinent notes, clarify data, and reflect on the dialogue immediately after each interview (Patton, 2002).

Utilizing the Information Collected

Once the information has been collected, data analysis should be conducted to organize and make meaning from the responses. Depending on the intention of the research and the types of questions asked, data collected from key informant interviews may be used to guide the following actions:

- identification of educational needs within a social group;
- design and implementation of new educational programs;
- decision-making regarding improving, expanding, maintaining, reducing, or eliminating current educational programs; and
- identification of monitoring and evaluation needs of current and future programs.

It is not practical for an agent to address all needs that may be uncovered during needs assessments. The role of the Extension educator is to translate identified needs and findings into program objectives and educational methods (Boone et al., 2002). Harder (2013) recommends first discarding nonprogrammatic needs. Nonprogrammatic needs are those that should be dealt with through other means, and are not applicable to the educational program. For example, community leaders may express the desire for a larger budget or more staff members. These needs may be more appropriately addressed by other means outside of Extension programming. Next, educational programming categories should be refined to confirm that the findings are best addressed through the agent's program. Finally, a team should be assembled and a system can be applied to determine priorities.

Summary

This article describes some methods of identifying key leaders to support an Extension agent's needs assessment activities, and briefly discusses interview methods and uses for the synthesized data. It is advantageous to approach key leaders when conducting Extension program planning, as these are the individuals who have influence over and understanding of the community. The result of including key leaders in the planning process is the identification of an organization's educational needs, which allows an Extension agent to create and adapt meaningful programming to meet those needs.

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