

Introduction

What is a needs assessment and why conduct one?

A needs assessment is a systematic approach to studying the state of knowledge, ability, interest, or attitude of a defined audience or group. Extension professionals use needs assessment to learn about important issues and problems faced by our public, in order to design effective educational programs. Programs and products that specifically target documented needs are inherently effective and marketable. Needs assessment also provides a method to learn about what has already been done and what gaps in learning remain. This allows the educator to make informed decisions about needed investments, thereby extending the reach and impact of educational programming.

For Extension, the goals of needs assessment are nearly always the same. The first goal is to learn what our audience already knows and thinks, so that we can determine what educational products and services are needed. A second goal of the needs assessment is to understand what we can do to make our educational products more accessible, acceptable, and useful to our clientele.

A needs assessment, thoughtfully performed, provides the following:

1. Insights about how education and training can impact your audience;
2. Knowledge about the various approaches that could be most effective;
3. Awareness of existing programs and of gaps in available training, to enable efficient use of resources;
4. Information about the current situation that can be used to document outcomes;
5. Knowledge about the potential demand for various programs and products;
6. Credibility that the program is serving the target audience, often communicating greater competence and professionalism to funding authorities.

A needs assessment is conducted so the target audience can verify its own level of knowledge and skill, its interests and opinions, or its learning habits and preferences. Collecting and analyzing needs assessment data allows the investigator to describe the “gap” between what exists and what is needed. Filling that gap becomes the purpose of the next generation of educational services and products.

Direct and indirect assessments

A direct needs assessment is accomplished through formal research that gathers data from clientele. An indirect approach is to use secondary data or to ask surrogates (advisors) for their opinions about priority needs and issues. The direct assessment will result in data that is more specific to the needs of individuals, and it can be quantitative in terms of probability and confidence. However, direct research requires considerably more resources to design and also requires institutional approval to conduct. Direct assessment should be conducted periodically for major program efforts. An indirect assessment can be conducted at any time when an advisory committee is meeting, and does not require the same level of investment in the design, implementation, and analysis. However, even for a non formal assessment, if the results are to be credible, procedures must be followed and findings must be carefully documented.

Comprehensive needs assessment research helps document actual problems and deficiencies. With the needs assessment in hand, an educator can 1) verify and describe the current situation, 2) explain how the program will address that need, and 3) describe the expected impacts of the program (i.e., build a logic model). Educators also can demonstrate the basis for their model when they request support from potential partners or funders. Because most funding sources insist that a project is evaluated, the information in a needs assessment forms the basis for a program evaluation. When the intervention results in measurable change, project managers will know whether they have succeeded or know what steps need to be taken next.

While the goals for needs assessments are similar, the purposes to conduct needs assessment vary, and will influence how the project is approached. Extension is required by statute to consider stakeholder input as part of the design and delivery of programs. There are also contractual agreements between State and local governments that Extension addresses locally relevant issues. Granting agencies and organizations may require

needs assessment as a term of performance. Because of these legal and contractual purposes for needs assessment, the procedures need to be valid and the results verifiable.

Needs assessments are also conducted simply to generate better knowledge with which to make decisions. If better information is the sole purpose for conducting a needs assessment, the procedures may be less formal, although the steps to plan, gather, and analyze data are still relevant.

Steps in conducting a needs assessment

The first step to conducting a needs assessment is to develop a plan. The assessment plan begins as a description of the what, when, who, how, and why of your project. This description becomes a plan for designing, conducting, and evaluating a needs assessment. The components of a needs assessment plan include:

1. **Objectives:** What is it that you want to learn from the needs assessment?
2. **Audience:** Who is the target audience? Whose needs are you measuring and who will give you the required information?
3. **Data Collection:** How will you collect the data that will tell you what you need to know? Will you collect data directly from the target audience or indirectly?
4. **Sampling Procedure:** How will you select a sample of respondents who represent the target audience?
5. **Techniques:** What instruments and techniques will you use to collect data?
6. **Analysis:** How will you analyze the data you collect?
7. **Follow-up:** What will you do with the information that you gain? Data gathering methods by themselves are not a needs assessment. For the process to be complete, the needs assessment process has to result in decision-making.

Institutional Approval is required for any direct human research at the University of Idaho (or any other entity that receives funding from the Federal government). Consequently, approval must be obtained before conducting direct needs assessment research. Indirect research (using secondary data or data that already exists) is not subject to institutional approval, and meetings or discussions asking for ideas from advisory committees are not research activities, thus are not subject to approval.

At the University of Idaho, the Institutional Review is conducted by the Human Assurances Committee (HAC). Once you have completed your assessment plan and have drafted your instrument, you must complete the Human Subjects Review form and submit that form to the HAC. Depending on the nature of your research, you may also be required to complete an online course sponsored by National Institutes of Health or you may be required to submit your study plan and your proposed instrument. You will need to allow six weeks for committee approval of your proposal. In nearly all cases, your proposed research methods (for a needs assessment) will be determined to be either: 1) exempt from HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects, or 2) qualified for expedited review by the HAC. Procedures for HAC approval are found at <http://www.uro.uidaho.edu/hac>.

Objectives of the needs assessment

The various objectives of a needs assessment are based on two things: who is asking the questions (what is your mission and responsibility?) and who is the target audience. The objectives will dictate how the needs assessment is to be designed and conducted.

Needs assessment can either document the current situation for a *group* or for a *target population*. A needs assessment is often conducted for a specific group, organization, or business in order to improve effectiveness or productivity of the group, related to its mission. The objectives for the assessment are related to the objectives of the organization. For a company, organizational assessments are a process to learn how to close a training or performance gap. For example, a business might be looking for ways to improve customer service and the target audience is the employees and customers of the business. Other examples of an organizational needs assessment might include a school district investigating the most efficient use of available teachers, or a volunteer organization trying to decide which fund raising project to conduct next. In these examples, the target audiences (those who will be providing the data) are teachers and/or parents/students in the district and the membership of the service organization. Extension professionals may have opportunities to help organizations assess their needs, and would follow essentially the same planning steps as for a target population.

When a needs assessment is conducted on behalf of the public (for the benefit of multiple individuals, but not a specific group), then the objectives tend to focus on what is needed to improve the situation for individuals, through changing knowledge, behavior, and conditions. A comprehensive needs assessment for such an audience should include objectives similar to those of a market analysis. In other words, it may not be enough to learn your audience's needs if they are not interested in your resulting solution. The effort must also determine what services and products will appeal to the audience.

The objectives of a needs assessment for a target population, then, are not limited to information about their existing knowledge and skills. Objectives may also require an investigation into the audience's perceived solutions, as well as their priorities and their preferences. If you only ask stakeholders what are their problems, it falls to you to determine what kinds of education will help address those problems. The limitation with this approach is that the intervention you design may not be marketable to your audience. If you ask stakeholders only what they want, you may have insufficient information with which to address the problems that need solving. For most of Extension's purposes, the needs assessment should be a systematic and comprehensive approach that reveals both the problems and the perceived solutions, and allows the investigator to design a program that connects the current situation to the desired future.

A **Community Needs Assessment** is a specific application for a targeted population that has recurring value for Extension. Some useful tools for working with community members to conduct needs assessments can be found on the web.ⁱⁱ Dozens of other guides and resources are available on the web to guide the conduct of specific needs assessments for public and community health issues, public housing needs, community conservation and environmental protection needs, and much more.

Describing the Target Audience

The target audience refers to those people whose needs you are trying to measure. For all target audiences it is important to know the size of the population. For a study focusing on the needs of an organization or group, a description of the target audience may include the various categories of employees, customers, or members; including their reasons to belong to the group, the length of time of their association, their geographic or organizational distribution, what they contribute to or receive from the group, cultural characteristics or biases, and age, sex, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. A careful and thorough description of the target audience leads to a more reliable sampling design and a more useful data set to be derived from your assessment. In many cases, the needs assessment can be used to validate or refute any preconceived notions of the audience.

An important aspect of describing the target audience is to research and describe the relationship between your audience and the issue or topic of the assessment. It is valuable to learn what the audience already knows or believes about the topic and what other efforts may have been mounted to address deficiencies. A reasonable investment to review the results from a previous needs assessment, to investigate previous training delivered by other providers, or to study other sources of data will greatly enhance the quality of your own study design. For these reasons, it may be useful to think of a broad-based needs assessment as a group of more targeted assessments. In other words, if you are planning to survey the public about their perceptions of diverse issues ranging from child care to water quality, you might consider proceeding as though you will be bundling several needs assessments together in a single operation.

ⁱ Gupta, Kavita, Catherine M. Sleezer and Darlene F Russ-Eft. 2007. *A Practical Guide to Needs Assessment*, Second edition. John Wiley and Sons, Inc. San Francisco.

ⁱⁱ See *A Community Needs Assessment Guide* by A. Sharma, M. Lanum and Y. Suarez-Balcazar from Loyola University of Chicago at http://www.luc.edu/curl/pdfs/A_Community_Needs_Assessment_Guide_.pdf