Community Needs Assessment Guide
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To ensure students have a clear understanding of the importance of a community needs assessment, gauge their understanding of "**community**" and "**need**."

Community
Ask the class: "What is a community?" How is it defined? What are the boundaries? i.e. (1) a group of people having common interests (2) a group viewed as forming a distinct segment of society (3) a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government. Ask: "What community(s) are you a part of?"

Need
Pose the question to the class: "What is a Need?" A need is something you have to have and cannot do without. Example: food-you need it to sustain yourself. A want is different- but may be perceived as a need by some people. Ask: "What do you consider a need for you?"

Purpose of Community Needs Assessment
- Identify Needs of community
- Communities or continuously changing—(social, cultural, economic)---Programs and policies need to evolve that recognize these changes so they are still relevant. (i.e. Political refugees of El Salvador, Immigrant populations to Los Angeles, Unemployment because of factory shut-downs in South L.A.)
- See what community is like-characteristics of people, types of organizations, values, beliefs, goals, concerns, and problems. (is it low-income, multicultural, high crime?)
- Sometimes needs are difficult to identify and therefore we may need to figure out how to assess the need. (High levels of depression, AIDS)
- Through an assessment people learn more about a situation and feel they have a voice in the outcome.
- Sometimes community needs are not revealed until a crisis occurs---(i.e. LA Uprisings, accidents due to no crosswalks)

(Source: Coping with Growth: Community Needs Assessment Techniques. Lorna Michael Butler and Robert E. Howell Accessed 8/20/'03
http://extension.usu.edu/wrdc/resources/coping/wrep44.htm)
(Source: http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/ Accessed on 8/22/03 Needs Assessment Strategies)

Steps to Assessing Community Needs

1. **Present Purpose of Needs Assessment**

2. **Know how to use the needs assessment**
    What do we want to know and why?
    How will we use information?

What information already exists and what do we need to gather?
Who should be involved in the gathering of data? Why?

3. **Determine what types of data to look for/collect**
   Statistics
   Personal interviews

4. **Design a survey instrument**
   What is an appropriate method for this population?
   Is this instrument feasible in terms of cost and time?
   Will this provide accurate and useful information?
   Will instrument result in information that can be easily analyzed?

5. **Gather data**
   Interviews
   Government data/statistics
           - e.g.: census data, public health findings
   Current events
   Surveys
           - large, widespread surveying or small, focused groups
   Small group discussions
   Community Forums
   Participant Observation

6. **Analyzing Data**
   Is data reliable?
   Does it reflect a general need?
   Identify and eliminate errors that have been made when collecting data.
   What are the major themes/obvious needs?

7. **Communicating the results of the needs assessment**

Approaches to Community Assessments

The following are different ways to gather information for a community assessment along with the advantages and disadvantages of each one. Use an approach that can be done effectively considering the various constraints such as liabilities, time, and resource availability.

EXISTING DATA
There is a variety of descriptive statistical data available that reveals important characteristics about a community. These descriptive statistics are complied as census data, labor surveys, police reports, school, and hospital information. Other sources include newspapers and community newsletters that reveal community conditions.

Advantages
   1. Makes use of already existing statistical data
   2. Can be done relatively quickly
   3. Easy to chart changes over time

Disadvantages
   1. Indicators often are indirect

2. Available information may not be current
3. Does not consider people's perceptions of needs

SURVEY
Information is gathered from a representative sample to reveal important characteristics of a community. Data is collected by personal interviews, telephone surveys, hand-delivered questionnaires or mail questionnaires.

Advantages
1. Valid and reliable data
2. Represents the attitudes of a broad range of individuals
3. Can obtain information on behavior as well as opinions

Disadvantages
1. May be more costly than other approaches—dollars and volunteer time
2. Questionnaire construction may be difficult
3. Requires more technical skills than other approaches

KEY INFORMANT
The Key Informant Approach identifies community leaders and decision makers who are knowledgeable about the community and can identify priority needs and concerns. Key informants complete a questionnaire or are interviewed to obtain their impressions of community needs.

Advantages
1. Quick and inexpensive
2. Questionnaire usually easy to prepare
3. Contact made in the information gathering process may help provide legitimation for later implementation

Disadvantages
1. Information likely to be biased—age, occupation, education, income
2. Information from key informants may be out of touch with real community needs.
3. Number of informants surveyed may be too small to generalize findings to total community

COMMUNITY FORUM
A public meeting is a larger setting that encourages community members to discuss community needs, prioritize needs, and steps to address these priority needs.

Advantages
1. Inexpensive and easy
2. Input comes from a wide range of people
3. May have good public relations as well as planning benefits

Disadvantages
1. Those who attend may not be representative of total community but may represent special interest groups
2. Participants may try to use the forum as a gripe session
3. Public meeting may heighten expectations beyond what the program may reasonably expect to deliver

FOCUS GROUP
A group of people selected for their particular skills, experience, views, or position are asked a series of questions about a topic or issue to gather their opinions. Group interaction is used to obtain detailed information about a particular issue.

Advantages
1. Relatively easy to undertake
2. Results can be obtained in a short period of time
3. Social interaction in the group produces freer and more complex responses
4. The researcher can probe for clarification and solicit greater detail
5. Responses have high face validity due to the clarity of the context and detail of the discussion

Disadvantages
1. Requires highly skilled moderator
2. Groups are often difficult to assemble
3. Individual responses are not independent of one another
4. The results may not be representative of the general population because the group is hand-selected

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Recommended Activities

Steps to conduct a Survey

Step 1 Determine the survey goal
- Students will conduct a survey in order to identify a community need and develop a project intended to address this need.

Step 2 Select a sample
- The size of the survey sample population will require consideration of realistic timetables and available resources for the project. The amount of persons to be surveyed, general location, boundaries of the community are important considerations.

Step 3 Make the questions
- Break students up into small groups to brainstorm possible questions for survey.
- Keep it simple: persons you survey may not want to be bothered by long tedious surveys, so keep the questions short, simple, and concise.
- Questions should be thorough and focused so that it will be easy to analyze the data after administering the survey.
- There are different types of questions that can be included in the survey:
    1) Open-ended 2) Multiple-Choice 3) Ratings or Rankings 4) Linkert-scale (i.e. *Strongly Agree_ Agree_ No Opinion_ Disagree_ Strongly Agree__)*

Step 4 Test the survey
- If possible, test the survey to determine if questions make sense and are understood by persons to be surveyed. Students can partner with each other and test the survey.

Step 5 Administer the survey
- Students should remember to be courteous when administering the survey. Mention the purpose of the survey and thank contributors for their participation.
- Determine how the survey should be given. (Personal acquaintances, large gathering place, phone, etc.)

Step 6 Analyze the data
- Determine the best way to aggregate data (computer-excel, graphs, tally)
- Students can be selected to tally most commonly identified community needs in the front of class with other students reading off survey results, and remaining students assisting in the analysis.
- Determine a method for selecting the community need to be addressed by the class service-learning project.

Step 7 Share and use the results
- Decide who should be informed of survey results. A community profile can be developed that is beneficial for students and community members to better understand their community environment.

Steps for Data Collection

This technique can be used alone or in conjunction with other approaches for a more thorough assessment.

Step 1 Identify what types of data you will be using for assessment.
- Newspaper
- Statistics
- Census Data

(For this age group, newspapers will probably be the easiest source to use, the information is easy to understand and is presented in a clear, familiar way. Newspapers are also much easier to collect than other data sources.)

Step 2 Explain the purpose of a needs assessment
- Remind students that a requirement of the service-learning project is that it address a community need. It is their task to determine what some community needs are and to develop a service-learning project addressing one need.

Step 3 Collect the data
- Ask students to bring in newspapers from home or print online statistics or census data. The teacher should also collect newspapers/data for student use.

Step 4 Review information
- Students should review the information in class individually, in pairs, or in small groups. If using newspapers, have students tear out articles that discuss a community need. If they select articles about national or global issues ask them to come up with local connections to what is happening in their own community, remembering that the point of the activity is to identify *local* community needs.

Step 5 Discuss findings
- After 20-30 minutes bring the class together and discuss the findings. Have students briefly share the topics or needs they found. On the chalkboard, make a tally of what topics were most commonly found.
- Make connections between related topics (such as connecting articles on car pollution and rising instances of asthma among children) and explain how one service-learning project might address multiple community needs.

Step 6 Decide on Topic
- Decide on a topic based on majority student interest. Ask the students to list the three topics that interest them most and make another tally of the most popular responses. (You may want to have the students to write down their top three interests so that all students have an equal and fair voice in the decision.)
- Based on the most popular choices you can then begin to brainstorm and develop a project to address the selected community need.

Steps to Conduct a Focus Group

Step 1 Define the purpose
- The purpose of the Focus Group is to bring together representatives of a variety of community entities to participate in a group discussion concerning the needs of our community.

Step 2 Identify the desired participants
- The Focus Group should be made up of variety community members. (School employees, parents, students, police, city officials etc.) Having a diverse group will provide a broad view of our community's needs and resources.
- Contact and inform participants. The Focus Group should have between 5-10 participants

Step 3 Generate the Questions
- The questions could arise from a class discussion involving the students, teacher and service coach.
- Questions should be short and straightforward.
- Questions should be thorough so that it will be easy to analyze the data.
- Questions could be open-ended, multiple choice, rating or ranking, Linker scale.

Step 4 Select the Facilitator
- The facilitator could be the teacher or one or more students who volunteer or are selected by their classmates. The facilitator will be responsible for conducting the focus group.

Step 5 Conduct the Focus Group
- Welcome and Introduction
- Pass out materials
- Go over the timeline and questions
- Monitor group discussion and answering of questions.
- Take notes and collect data.

- The Focus Group should be given enough time to thoughtfully review, discuss, and answer the questionnaire.

Step 6 Interpret and report results
- The facilitator, teacher, and service coach will analyze collected data.
- Data could be presented to the class in a tally, graphs, and/or spreadsheet.
- Based on the outcomes of the focus group the students will determine what community needs to address with their service-learning project.