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Needs Assessment Tool Kit

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Abstract

Conducting needs assessments serves as a valuable way for Extension educators to ensure that they are designing programs that meet community needs. We developed a needs assessment tool kit that educators across urban, suburban, and rural communities can use to answer the question "What are the youth development needs in my county?" Additionally, the tool kit's components can be easily adapted for use in all Extension program areas and thus serve as a resource for educators in various contexts desiring to gather stakeholder input needed to strengthen their programming.

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Background

An Extension educator will start a new program or initiative on the right track by conducting a needs assessment. A needs assessment is a systematic research method educators can use to drive community development programs (Worker et al., 2017). Nonformal educators should assess community needs, especially those of underserved audiences, to implement education programs that meet identified needs (Teuteberg & Cummins, 2017).

Indeed, Extension educators frequently conduct needs assessments to ensure that programming meets the needs of their respective urban, suburban, and rural communities. Needs assessments also can provide information to assist educators in identifying opportunities for cross-collaboration with partners. Educators can gather primary data from a variety of stakeholder audiences by applying a formal research approach to needs assessment (McCawley, 2009).

Developing a Needs Assessment Tool Kit

We designed a tool kit Extension educators can use to apply a formal, research-based approach to needs assessment. Although the tool kit was designed by 4-H educators and some materials therein contain wording oriented toward 4-H, any Extension educator seeking to conduct a needs assessment to gather data from youths, volunteers, or other stakeholder audiences can adapt and use the tool kit's components.

As Extension educators from three Maryland counties having urban, suburban, and rural populations— Baltimore (pop. 831,000, 334 4-H members), Frederick (pop. 245,322, 583 4-H members), and Washington

(pop. 150,578, 239 4-H members) (Maryland 4-H Online Database, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.)—we worked collaboratively to develop and validate the needs assessment tool kit. By subsequently implementing the tool kit, we were able to answer the question "What are the youth development needs in my county?"

The tool kit allows users to combine quantitative and qualitative data collection processes. It also facilitates the gathering of data from a variety of key stakeholder audiences, thereby allowing educators to triangulate collected data and uncover deeper meanings.

The tool kit has undergone University of Maryland Institutional Review Board approval, and each component contains a formal protocol that includes informed consent for participants.

Audiences and Data Collection Methodologies

Youths

As providers of positive youth development programs, 4-H educators must gather input from youths in and external to 4-H regarding topics of interest to them to develop relevant and interesting programming. Therefore, the tool kit contains a paper-based survey for gathering quantitative data from youths. Through this survey, youths are able to identify topics that interest them. When implementing the survey with a representative sample of youths, educators can use the results to understand the interests of young people in their communities and develop programming accordingly.

The tool kit provides instructions for how to conduct the survey with youths, along with an explanation of the verbal consent process required for institutional review board approval. See Appendix A for the youth survey.

Volunteers

Volunteers serve as the backbone of many Extension programs, making their perspectives and input regarding county-wide programming particularly important. Using 4-H as an example, it is important to gain volunteer perspective regarding priority programs for youths, volunteer professional development needs, best strategies for attracting and retaining 4-H members and volunteers, challenges volunteers face working with 4-H programs, and ideas for expanding the 4-H programs in the state's counties.

To allow educators to gain volunteer input on each of these subjects, we included in the tool kit both a quantitative electronic survey protocol for use in gathering input from many volunteers and a qualitative appreciative inquiry workshop protocol (Fields, 2011) for use in gathering input from volunteers in a focus group setting. The electronic survey protocol includes template email language and informed consent information to use when inviting volunteers to complete the survey. The appreciative inquiry workshop protocol also includes language for the volunteer participation invitation as well as instructions for conducting the focus group research. See Appendix B for the volunteer appreciative inquiry protocol.

Partners and Advisory Councils

Gaining the insights of partners, advisors, and other stakeholders regarding youth development or other

community priorities is also important when determining programming needs. The tool kit, therefore, contains a key informant interview protocol that can be used in one-on-one interviews or with focus groups to gather qualitative data from these audiences. Like other elements of the tool kit, the protocol includes language for inviting individuals to participate and instructions for completing the interviews or focus group research. See Appendix C for the key informant interview protocol.

Implications for Extension

Representing three counties having a wide range of demographic and programmatic diversity, we have successfully implemented various elements of the tool kit in our local communities. We are using the results to drive programming, thereby ensuring that our programs meet existing population needs. The tool kit can support educators nationwide in assessing their existing populations' needs and gathering the youth, volunteer, and stakeholder input necessary for strengthening their programs. The tool kit's components can be easily adapted for use in all Extension program areas. The complete tool kit is available from us upon request.

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Appendix A

Youth Survey

1) Are you a current 4-H member?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No
2) How old are you? _____
3) What grade are you in? _____
4) What area/community of [name of county] do you live in?
   _____
5) I am a [name of county] youth who would be interested in the
   following 4-H programs:

☐ Robotics & Engineering Projects & Contests	☐ Helping the Environment/Wildlife
☐ Filmmaking & Photography	☐ Leadership Training (teens)
☐ College & Career Planning	☐ Horticulture (growing plants)
☐ Animal Science (goat, rabbit, horse, dairy, etc.)	☐ Cooking/Food Science
☐ ATV/Bicycle Safety	☐ Agriculture Education
☐ [Name] County 4-H Camp	☐ Healthy Living & Food Preparation
☐ [Name] County 4-H Fair	☐ Welding/Agriculture Mechanics
☐ Chemistry Experiments	☐ Genes, DNA, & Biotechnology
☐ Shooting Sports	☐ Electricity & Energy
☐ Community Service/Leadership	☐ Fashion Design & Show
☐ GPS Technology/Geocaching	☐ Soil Science & Technology
☐ Science Experiments	☐ Microbiology
☐ Arts & Crafts	☐ Forestry/Tree Identification
☐ Financial Literacy	☐ Scrapbooking
☐ Public Speaking	☐ Coding/Computer Science

Appendix B

Volunteer Appreciative Inquiry Protocol

Informed Consent:

Read the informed consent statement to the group. Have copies available for participants to take with them. Please answer any questions they may have about the research.

Instructions for Educator:

One way to engage volunteers in program assessment is to integrate appreciative inquiry (AI) sessions into volunteer development and training opportunities. You can facilitate an AI session during volunteer development training by dividing the session into three segments: 1) paired groupings for individual program reflection; 2) combined pairings for group reflection; and 3) energizing for the future.

Paired Groupings for Individual Program Reflection (20 minutes)

Within this segment, volunteers divide into pairs for reflective interviews. Both volunteers would have about 10 minutes each to serve as interviewer and interviewee. Potential topics and questions for this reflective survey include:

<u>Inspired Service – Recalling a Best Experience</u>

Each participant should ask the other member of his/her pair to think about their interactions and engagements with 4-H. The interviewer should ask their partner to tell a story about his/her best experience with 4-H. Suggested questions are:

- What were you doing?

- Who were you volunteering with?

- What made it successful?

- What was the impact on you and/or your community?

<u>Partnering for Success</u>

Each partner in a pair should ask the other person:

- On a scale of 1 to 5 with "1" being "not at all" and "5" being "exceptional," how successful would you say the program is at fulfilling its purpose?"

- What do you need from the program to help you fulfill the organization's purpose?

- How can the program help you achieve our goals?

<u>Envisioning the Future</u>

Each pair should imagine 10 years have passed and the program is exceeding expectations. Each member of the pair should ask the other person:

- How have things changed?

- What new opportunities exist?

- What challenges are you experiencing?

After each of the volunteers have been interviewed, the pairs will find one or two other pairs to form a larger group. This will lead into the next segment.

Combined Pairings for Group Reflection (15 minutes)

During this segment, the group should receive three sheets of newsprint that are individually labeled: inspired service (what's working; positive impact), partnering for success (do more of or better), and envisioning the future (creating the best path).

Each group member should take no more than a minute to introduce their partner by sharing his/her best experience in the program. Group members should then identify a recorder and a reporter and take 15 minutes to generate a list of items for the categories written on each of the three newsprint pages by using the data generated from the interview sheets.

Once the group has completed this process, they will transition to the final segment.

Energizing for the Future (15 minutes)

During this segment, volunteers will review the items on their group's newsprint lists and decide what statements make them feel the most energized. Give each volunteer nine sticky dots to place next to the statements they feel most strongly about (energy). Ask the volunteers to place three dots next to statements on each newsprint list. Volunteers may place more than one dot on a statement if it is particularly important to them.

Once all the group members' dots are placed on the three newsprint lists, tabulate the dots to identify the top three statements on each list.

Each group should share the top three statements on their newsprint lists with the larger audience.

A final report generated from the AI session can be shared with the volunteer constituent base and used to enhance the program quality in the future.

Appreciative Inquiry material developed by Dr. Nia Imani Fields (nfields@umd.edu). Fact Sheet FS-997, January 2015

Appendix C

Key Informant Interview Protocol

Introductory Text:

Good Morning/Afternoon! Again, let me thank you for taking your valuable time to talk with me about the needs, challenges, and opportunities of 4-H in [name of county].

Let me go over the informed consent statement with you (please read and give a copy to the interviewee).

As a reminder, I am recording the session only to help me take notes of our conversation. As soon as I complete the transcription of our conversation, I will destroy this audio recording. If, for any reason, you do not want me to record, please let me know.

Let's get started.

Existing Partner Questions:

1. Given that I'm fairly new in this job, could you tell me a little bit about what your organization is doing (in regard to youth issues) in [name of county]?

2. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing [name of county] youth in the past 5 years?

3. What has 4-H been doing well to help youth meet these challenges?

4. What else should 4-H be doing to help youth meet these challenges?

5. If you had $100,000 to grow a 4-H youth development program/youth development program in [name of county], what would it look like?

   Probe: Where would you get started?

   Probe: Who would be involved?

   Probe: Where should the program expand to remain relevant?

   Probe: What's emerging and how do we adapt to meet those needs?

   Probe: Is there a larger community need that we should be addressing in our work with youth?

   Probe: Do you think there are groups of youth who are underserved in our county? Who are they?

6. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being not important, 2 being a little important, 3 being important, and 4 being very important, how important do you think these topics are for youth in [name of county]? *[Provide survey in hard copy form for individual to complete].*

   - Building community and civic engagement   1   2   3   4

- Developing leadership skills for life   1   2   3   4
- Nurturing social empowerment and resilience   1   2   3   4
- Improving college and workforce readiness   1   2   3   4
- Fostering exploration and creativity in arts and sciences   1   2   3   4
- Promoting healthy lifestyle and self-acceptance   1   2   3   4

7. What are the barriers that you see pertaining to youth development in [name of county]?

8. Is there another key person you would recommend I talk to?

9. Is there anything else that you want to tell me that I haven't asked you about?

10. What organizations/corporations could we approach for sponsorship and assistance?

New Partner Questions:

1. Given that I'm fairly new in this job, could you tell me a little bit about what your organization is doing (in regard to youth issues) in [name of county]?

2. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing [name of county] youth in the past 5 years?

3. Tell me what you know about the [name of county] 4-H program?

4. If you had $100,000 to grow a 4-H youth development program/youth development program in [name of county], what would it look like?

     Probe: Where would you get started?

     Probe: Who would be involved?

     Probe: Where should the program expand to remain relevant?

     Probe: What's emerging and how do we adapt to meet those needs?

     Probe: Is there a larger community need that we should be addressing in our work with youth?

     Probe: Do you think there are groups of youth who are underserved in our county? Who are they?

5. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being not important, 2 being a little important, 3 being important, and 4 being very important, how important do you think these topics are for youth in [name of county]? *[Provide survey in hard copy form for individual to complete].*

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- Improving college and workforce readiness   1   2   3   4
- Fostering exploration and creativity in arts and sciences   1   2   3   4
- Promoting healthy lifestyle and self-acceptance   1   2   3   4

6. What are the barriers that you see pertaining to youth development in [name of county]?

7. Is there another key person you would recommend I talk to?

8. Is there anything else that you want to tell me that I haven't asked you about?

9. What organizations/corporations could we approach for sponsorship and assistance?