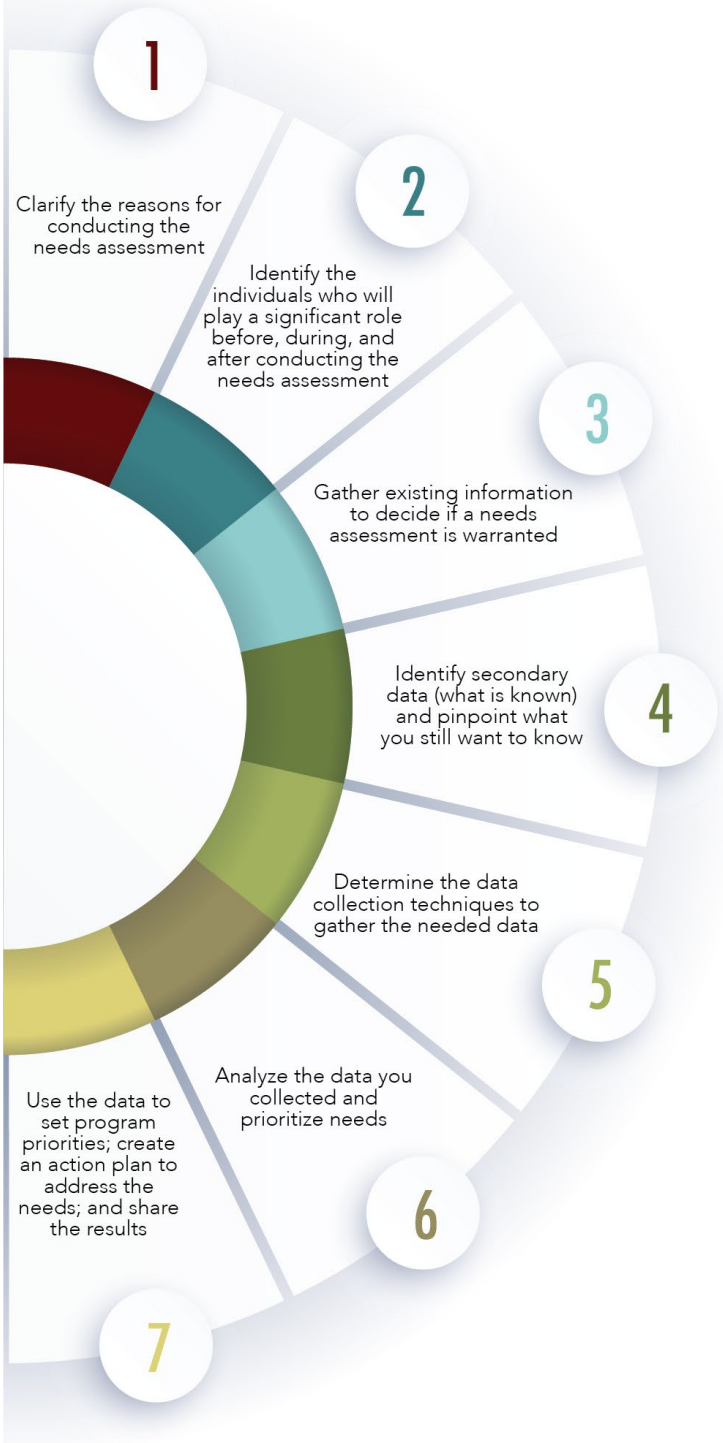
MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

Needs Assessment: Step-by-Step Through Practical Examples



Through Extension, we aim to improve people's lives by responding to their needs through research and education-based efforts. The first step in offering effective and efficient educational programs that address people's needs is identifying and prioritizing the community's needs, which we call a needs assessment. A needs assessment allows you to construct a more objective picture of needs than you would receive depending on one person's perspective. As Extension professionals (agents and specialists), a needs assessment is crucial for informing your educational program decisions and enhancing their effectiveness and value.

This publication aims to help Extension professionals get started with needs assessments, illustrated through practical examples.

Needs Assessment Step-by-Step

1. Clarify the reasons for conducting the needs assessment.

Outline the purpose and planned use of the results.

Example
The purpose of conducting a needs assessment is to identify topics for 4-H programs and activities. The results will be used to determine the three programs that will be implemented during summer break.

Keep in mind!
- What is the purpose?
- What do you aim to accomplish?
- Who will use the results?

2. Identify the individuals who play a significant role before, during, and after conducting the needs assessment.

Identify individuals who: a) share their perspectives on current issues; b) hold decision-making power; c) assist in prioritizing the gathered needs; d) aid in reaching out to the community or target audience and share the findings from the assessment; and e) communicate results to key stakeholders.

Example
Create a list of individuals, sponsors, administrators, interest groups (Farm Bureau, CREATE Foundation, United Way, or the Minority Farmers Alliance), and the county advisory board. These groups or individuals need to be included because they can share their perspectives on current situations, communicate the results of the assessments, directly influence the community's priorities, and be part of the decision-making process.

Keep in mind!
- Identify the stakeholders.
- Build your networks.
- Reach out to your community.

3. Gather existing information to decide if a needs assessment is warranted.

Understand the history of the problem and what information/data already exists in your county by seeking expert advice, visiting the area (if possible), establishing local contacts, and building community relations (attending local events and town hall meetings, partnering with local organizations, forming an advisory council, etc.).

Example
Consider attending a community event such as a farmers market; observe the participants, meet people, and collect information from as many individuals as possible.

Keep in mind!
- A needs assessment takes time, energy, money, and other resources.

4. Identify secondary data (what is known) and pinpoint what you still want to know.

Secondary data will give you a quick sense of what is going on in your community.

Example
Agriculture and natural resources agents rely on county data from the Agricultural Census, where data such as age, race, and sex are listed for all the counties in Mississippi. The Agricultural Census is a helpful source for assessing needs in your county. However, primary data should be collected directly from those individuals connected to the community problems, ranging from clients and advisory groups to opinion leaders, to enhance an understanding of community needs. Example sources of secondary data include the following:

- Kids Count
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- Census of Agriculture
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- National Center for Education Statistics
- Food and Nutrition Information Center
- USDA Economic Research Service
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Mississippi State University Extension Service
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Mississippi Department of Education
- United States Department of the Interior
- Mississippi State Department of Health
- World Factbook
- Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce
- Health and nutrition statistics
- Local and regional media reports that have stories that impact your communities
- Regional and county level data at local libraries or chambers of commerce

Keep in mind!
- Using a mix of primary and secondary sources provides a rich and comprehensive assessment.
- Secondary data provide detailed information from a large sample size that would be difficult and unrealistic for you to collect independently. They also provide information over several years, helping to identify trends.

- It is important to look at county-level statistics and not just statewide data because each county might have hidden issues.

5. Determine the data-collection technique to gather the needed data.

Choose methods that help discover more specific issues and gain different perspectives from various sources.

Example

Use techniques you are comfortable with and that are applicable to the target audience. An older population may prefer a written survey or an interview, while a younger population may prefer an online survey using a QR code. The information you are attempting to gather may also determine the method. A roundtable discussion may be more successful for Extension agents when collecting data from their advisory council. A roundtable discussion is a more personal method of gathering data, helping to establish group relationships.

Keep in mind

- A needs assessment must consist of several methods. Looking at only one dataset will not accurately reflect what is happening in a community.
- Many methods can be used to gather data, including individual methods (surveys and key informant interviews) and group methods (focus groups, advisory committees, and the Delphi method). The key is to be aware of the pros and cons of each technique to ensure their effective use.

6. Analyze the data you collected and prioritize needs.

Analyzing data means breaking down the collected information to identify key findings, areas of agreement or disagreement, and agreed-upon conclusions about the identified needs. Sorting and prioritizing needs means organizing and ranking each identified need and determining which ones to address first.

Keep in mind!

- Participants in the prioritization process should include volunteer staff, community leaders, legislative leaders, and representatives of funding organizations.
- Establish and develop criteria to evaluate each issue, and then determine the priority issue (e.g., using propriety, economics, acceptability, resources, and legality—the PEARL test).

7. Use the data to set program priorities, create an action plan to address the needs, and share the results.

Example

According to a review of secondary data, beekeeping is a growing industry in Lee County, Mississippi. County residents also reported that it is a growing hobby and expressed interest in both beginner and advanced beekeeping. To address and identify the needs of Lee County residents, we planned two different beekeeping workshops. We created priorities related to beekeeping topics of interest and implemented a program to address them. We selected speakers based on the education necessary for each group, chose dates for each workshop, made promotional materials, ordered complementary publications for the topic, and secured a location at the back of our office. After promoting the workshops, we waited for individuals to sign up, effectively putting our plan into action.

Keep in mind!

- A needs assessment is only completed once the results are shared and used.
- Create an action plan, accept that plans may change, and be prepared to adapt and modify the action plan as needed.
- There are several ways to share the results with stakeholders, including a detailed report or executive summary. These could be sent via email or posted on the organization's website for everyone to see.

Summary

When considering needs assessments in your community, listen closely, be observant, and be diligent. Set your goals and act with enthusiasm. Feel free to ask for help. Including your community increases the likelihood of buy-in regarding the action plan.

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