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# Community Organizing to Develop Healthy Environments

## *A Web of Connections Activity*

### Introduction to the Web of Connections

This activity enables participants to recognize the interconnectedness of their professions and communities and the vital roles they each play in addressing key issues.

Groups and teams benefit from a variety of perspectives and insights. When each group member brings experiences and expertise to their group, the whole group or team emerges with a more complete and robust result or solution. This **multidisciplinary** approach helps groups solve problems in a more holistic and comprehensive way.

The Web of Connections exercise is designed to help participants better understand and visualize the relationships between their different areas of experience and expertise as it relates to their group or team's purpose. This Web of Connections activity, regardless of the issue being addressed or the nature of the group, is a great way to get the creative and innovative juices flowing! This activity is suitable for groups 12 years of age and older.

### Materials Needed

- A ball of yarn
- Scissors
- Signs/objects that represent academic disciplines, professions, social issues, resources, parts of systems, etc. (See table on page 4.)
- Space for participants to sit or stand in a circle

### Instructions

- ✓ The facilitator will explain to participants the focus of the activity. Participants should collaborate and think critically on how the components or roles relate to each other.
- ✓ Form a circle so participants are facing one another.
- ✓ Give each individual one of the signs or objects that symbolize the perspective or issue they are to represent in the activity. This activity is ideal for groups of 12 but can be adapted for smaller or larger groups. If the group size is larger than the number of roles, have participants work in groups; if it is smaller, eliminate roles or have individuals play more than one role.
- ✓ Any participant can begin making connections; however, the facilitator may want to start to demonstrate how the activity should work.

- ✓ The first person or group will start with the ball of yarn and explain to everyone the details of their assigned component/role (represented by the sign or object).
- ✓ While holding onto the string, the first person will pass the ball of yarn to another person or group with a sign or object.
- ✓ The next person or group then will explain the details of their topic, as well as how theirs is *connected* to the group before them. The first connection of the web is now made.
- ✓ Continue to pass the ball of yarn until everyone has presented their connection, and then cut the string.

*\*Note that participants can mention how their topic relates to several of the previously presented ones. For instance, the fourth component/role can be connected with the third, second, or first.*

- ✓ Lastly, the audience may take the time to discuss the connection made during the activity. A few examples of discussion questions include:
  1. What other connections are possible that have not been made?
  2. What connections were the most obvious?
  3. What connections surprised you?
  4. How does this exercise influence your feelings about \_\_\_\_\_?
  5. Which additional roles or issues could be added to the web?
  6. Do you feel like more can be accomplished when groups/interdisciplinary teams are formed? Why or why not?
  7. How can the connections represented here today help solve problems? Could they complicate issues even further?
  8. How can you use what you learned during this activity?



## *Want to expand this activity and make it a multisession set of experiences?*

If time permits, students can apply this activity to another specific topic area they are studying. Students may research components and/or professions within that area, and then lead their own Web of Connections activity. Another way to expand this activity is to host a follow-up discussion panel featuring professionals within the field. These additional activities can help students think more independently and gain a deeper perspective of the topic.

To help you facilitate your own Web of Connections activity, we have provided examples for the following topics:

- Community Organizing (MSU Extension Publication 3093)
- Global and Domestic Issues with Hunger (MSU Extension Publication 3136)
- Interprofessional Aspects of Healthcare (MSU Extension Publication 3137)

Each Web of Connections activity also includes an evaluation form for facilitators to obtain participants' feedback.

### **Community Organizing to Develop Healthy Environments**

Various individual, environmental, and relational factors may impact the health of a community and its residents. Such factors are referred to as *social determinants of health*. Community organizing, a process of identifying community needs and securing resources necessary to address selected issues, offers community members an opportunity to create health-promoting environments toward witnessed improvements in health outcomes and quality of life for residents.

Community organizing consists of a multidisciplinary approach including participation from stakeholders, gatekeepers, doers, and influencers. Stakeholders are people who are impacted by the community issues of interest and will be affected by efforts to change the selected issues. Gatekeepers can determine access to

stakeholders and make decisions about community activities. Examples may include but are not limited to teachers, principals, and superintendents (for access to students and their parents/families), and pastors and church leaders (for access to congregants). Doers are community members who are willing to actively engage in efforts to plan, implement, and sustain change efforts. Influencers may be less active in change efforts than doers but have social capital and can garner support of gatekeepers and other key leaders in the community. Note that these roles are overlapping, as people may serve various roles within a community.

For a sample scenario using different community roles to develop healthy environments, see page 4.

## Sample Scenario

### Community Organizing to Address Childhood Obesity

Most recent estimates indicate one in five school-aged children (ages 6–19 years) is obese. Childhood obesity is the result of a combination of factors, such as genetics, social and physical environment, and dietary and physical activity behaviors. Understanding the complexity of this health outcome, efforts to address childhood obesity should include multidisciplinary perspectives and partnerships.

With respect to young people and their health, parents, teachers, school administrators, and leaders of youth-serving community organizations, among others, may provide solutions to deleterious health outcomes.

Using the list of community members presented on page 5, we may identify the following connections:



#### Adapted From

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/index.htm>

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm>

Role in Community	Description
Business owner	Local business owners may support your changes by providing products or services for community residents.
City government	<p>Policymakers within the community are responsible for representing the interests of community residents and ensuring their safety. Examples of city government representatives may include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• aldermen</li> <li>• city council representatives</li> <li>• city planner</li> <li>• law enforcement officers</li> <li>• mayor</li> </ul>
Community resident	Members of the community, especially those who are directly impacted by the health issues you're addressing, should be included to offer perspectives on their individual and family needs.
Director/leader of community organization	<p>Administrative personnel who have responsibilities to provide services/resources to members of the community and represent—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community-service organizations</li> <li>• nonprofit organizations</li> <li>• philanthropic organizations</li> <li>• social organizations</li> </ul>
Extension agent	An Extension agent may have expertise in various areas, including agriculture and natural resources and family and consumer sciences. Additionally, the Extension agent serves as a resource to members of specific cities, towns, and counties.
Healthcare service/hospital representative	Representatives within healthcare service organizations and hospitals are familiar with the most prevalent health conditions and availability of services.
Health department representative	Health department representatives can work in local or state health departments and serve as resources for accurate and current health information and best practices for addressing health issues.
Health educator	The health educator assesses the needs of community residents and develops, implements, and evaluates programs designed to address the identified health needs.
Grant writer	A grant writer has expertise in seeking and securing funding opportunities to support programs within a community.
Leader of religious organization	Religious organizations are common places for community residents to gather. Additionally, such organizations and their leaders offer insight into the culture and value of community members.
Researcher	A researcher with expertise related to the selected issues can provide information on factors influencing the issues and best strategies to effectively address them.
School representative	<p>School representatives are responsible for ensuring the health and safety of their students. Examples of school representatives may include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• principals</li> <li>• school superintendents</li> <li>• teachers</li> <li>• teachers' aids</li> <li>• volunteers (members of the PTA/PTO and parent volunteers)</li> </ul>

## Web of Connections Evaluation Survey

Workshop: *Community Organizing to Develop Healthy Environments*

Facilitator: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Group participating in the activity: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your response to each item:

	Strongly Disagree (SD)	Disagree (D)	Neutral (N)	Agree (A)	Strongly Agree (SA)
This activity...					
a. related to my needs.					
b. was understandable.					
Participating in this activity was worth my time.					
I would recommend this activity to others.					
My knowledge increased about how people are connected, in general.					
My knowledge increased about how social determinants can impact the health of a community.					
My understanding of addressing the health of the community through organizing roles of stakeholders and gatekeepers has increased.					
I will tell others what I learned through this activity about the web of connections of community organizing.					



The most important thing I learned through this activity was:

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One specific thing that I plan to use or apply as a result of this activity is:

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By Brittney Oliver, PhD, Assistant Professor, Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion; Victorian Tilley, Graduate Assistant, Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion; David Buys, PhD, MSPH, CPH, Assistant Extension/Research Professor and State Health Specialist, Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion; and Laura Brumbaugh-Robertson, Extension Agent, Tate County.

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