

A New Look at How to Assess Future Needs in Extension Educational Programs

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Need for Idea. Analyzing people’s needs is one of the key steps in program planning. The traditional approach to needs assessment, which Extension currently uses, has been criticized since the 1980s (Altschuld, 2015). The traditional approach to needs assessment helps to identify and prioritize needs in order to make needs-based decisions, allocate resources, and implement actions in an organization or community to resolve problems (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 25). However, the traditional approach has several limitations: 1) the assets available for a specific community are not always known nor identified; 2) the needs assessment focuses on the negative aspects of the community; 3) the communities being assessed are always perceived as vulnerable and recipients of benefits; 4) communities perceive themselves as recipients of benefits and do not utilize the available assets to build their communities; instead, communities will wait for external support to address identified needs (Altschuld, 2015).

In the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda: 2016-2020, Thoron, Myers, and Barrick indicated that research priority #5 is “Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education programs” and Extension educators “must provide cutting edge educational programming” (p. 43). How can we identify future demand for Extension programming? In 2006, Comer, Campbell, Edwards, and Hillison wrote that understanding past and current trends is highly important when we plan future Extension programming. Thus, in the Extension arena we need a new, innovative, and/or integrative approach that allows the evaluator to assess local community resources/assets and citizen’s needs. We offer a two-phased approach; Phase I is a research-based marketing approach, while Phase II is an asset-based approach to needs assessment.

Methodology.

Phase I. Raymond (1987) discussed the importance of a research-based marketing approach for Extension. Market research is focused on a specific market. The Extension Service offers programming to a unique service market segment - non-formal education. The philosophy of the marketing approach for Extension involves “scanning the environment’ to identify the needs of clientele, target audiences, and match Extension’s programs with audience needs” (Raymond, 1987, p.1). Rust and Huang (2014) noted that transformative service marketing research is an emerging type of research based on customer centricity. Customer well-being is a central focus of transformative service research. Ostrom, Mathras, and Anderson (2014) defined transformative service research as “the integration of consumer and service research that centers on creating uplifting changes and improvements in the well-being of consumer entities: individuals, communities and the ecosystem” (p.559). The purpose of a research-based marketing approach for Extension programming is to identify non-formal educational demand through the comprehensive examination of local community resources and assets. Market research for Extension programming allows the researcher to: (1) gather all available information on a county level to better understand the availability of resources, local citizens’ problems and needs through the analysis of secondary data; and (2) identify future Extension programming for local communities based on the secondary data analysis.

Phase II. An asset-based needs assessment approach will be used in this research to identify the county’s available assets and needs at the community level. This process builds on the positives

of the communities and encourages communities to utilize their assets and not extensively rely on external aid (Altschuld, 2015). Phase II will utilize qualitative and quantitative research strategies, namely: focus group interviews, dine and dialogue sessions, and a survey for the selected county. A “Quality of Life” instrument and focus group interview questions are currently being developed. The results of the asset-based needs assessment will help to mobilize the community’s assets, resources, and strengths and provide opportunities to address the identified needs. We plan to complete conducting Phase II of our research in fall 2016.

Results. The Franklin County in Ohio was selected as a pilot project for the Market Analysis and Needs Assessment. The market report for the county (Phase I) included secondary data analysis (analysis of existing data) of the following major areas: demographics; health; agriculture; business and industries; local county Extension resources; recent Extension programming efforts; non-formal (community) educational opportunities outside of Extension; and world, national, and local trends. The secondary data for the analysis has been gathered from the U.S. Bureau of Census, Labor Statistics, and Economic Analysis; administrative records, and local historical records (Voss, Tordella, & Brown, 1987). In addition to the aforementioned resources, the researchers decided to use official reports, Extension resources, and other available information.

Based on the results of the market analysis for the Franklin County, we identified and synthesized the following possible future Extension programming: 1) work readiness and workforce development programs for youth in low-income families and youth who have less than a high school diploma or GED equivalent; 2) professional assistance with federal, state, and local benefits, and possible alternatives to educational opportunities for youth and work opportunities for adults in low-income families and families in poverty; 3) assist with single parenting issues; 4) chronic disease management; 5) healthy lifestyle practices; 6) challenges in changing family structure; 7) unintentional falls and injuries among children under 16 and adults over age 45; 8) new technologies in agriculture; 9) woman in farming and urban farming; 10) biosecurity on the farm; 11) hobby farms in urban and suburban environments.

Advice to others. Integrative or mixed methodologies in research and evaluation have been widely accepted for the last decade in the social and behavioral sciences (Creswell, 2014). Multiple ways to investigate community needs allows Extension personnel to overcome the weaknesses of a traditional or single-approach research method. We are recommending the use of a modified, adapted from Creswell (2014), sequential exploratory methodology. Creswell’s method includes exploring a phenomena quantitatively first (Phase I: market analysis) and then uses a mixed-method of data collection and analysis as a second phase (Phase II: quality of life survey, focus group interviews and assets-based approach to needs assessment). This integrative, mixed-method approach will complement a traditional Extension needs assessment.

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