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Conducting a Formal Needs Assessment: A Five-Step Survey Approach

Loretta Singletary
Extension Educator

Pamela Powell
Extension Educator

Introduction

Increasingly, formal needs assessments to determine program focus are expected and, in some states, required of extension professionals. Gathering information to help isolate key program topics is a critical step in developing meaningful programs with measurable impacts. For University of Nevada Cooperative Extension faculty, the art and science of designing and implementing formal and objective needs assessments has advanced significantly in recent years. All faculty members are required to conduct periodic needs assessments and report the results to colleagues and citizens.

The primary purpose of a needs assessment is very simple: Only through identifying what extension programs are needed can we create programs useful to citizens that have significant and lasting impacts. While some identified needs may vary among communities within the same county, others may have statewide implications. A carefully planned and methodically executed needs assessment prior to program development can go a long way in helping extension professionals target program topics that address citizen needs.

A Five-Step Survey Approach

There are numerous ways to conduct a formal needs assessment. Perhaps one of the most popular approaches is to survey the public. A survey provides citizens with an opportunity to influence program development directly. One popular survey approach involves mail surveys. In designing and implementing a mail survey, there are five steps to follow.

Step 1 *P* **Develop questions and determine protocol: To earnestly assess public needs, you must ask questions about a variety of topics. You must determine your protocol or “how you will ask the questions.”**

A broad-based needs assessment generally requires that you formulate and ask a broad

range of questions concerning potential issues affecting the study area. These questions may examine, for example, employment and infrastructure, health, education and other social services, in addition to environmental or natural resource issues.

When using a mail survey, you must consider carefully how to phrase questions and format the questionnaire. There are excellent publications available to assist with question writing, protocol design and survey implementation¹.

A survey provides citizens with an opportunity to influence program development directly.

Once you devise your questionnaire and compose a cover letter, you must consider the details for implementing the survey. A mail survey will require a list of addresses and a budget for postage and printing. You must decide whether to select a random sample of participants or whether to target a specific population. For example, target populations may include livestock producers, other business owners, elected officials, youth or retirees.

Step 2 P Complete training and seek certification to conduct research: In order to share your results, you must complete the required training and receive certification from the Office of Human Research Protection Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The University of Nevada, Reno provides an Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the UNR Office of Human Research Protection (UNR OHRP). This office reviews proposed research conducted under the auspices of the university. The office administers the IRBs, whose job is to protect research participants from harm caused by university research.

Prior to submitting an application conduct the survey, you must successfully complete an on-line training provided through the UNR OHRP. Information and links to the training site can be found at UNR's Office of Human Research Protection website (www.unr.edu/ohrp/Training.htm). The website links provide instructions for how to register for the training. Within twenty-four hours, you will receive a password to access the training site.

The training, sponsored by the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative (CITI) and the University of Miami, has over 180 participating institutions. It includes thirteen modules, one of which may be eliminated if you are not conducting human research at the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System in Reno. In addition, you must review the UNR Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protection and the Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. Links to these documents may be found on UNR's institutional page found on the CITI website.

You may take the training in open-book fashion. That is, you may print the module in advance, review content and then refer to it while taking the quiz. It is advised not to have any other computer programs running while testing, as moving between programs

¹ An excellent resource to help guide mail survey construction and implementation is [Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, 2nd edition](#), by Don A. Dillman, 2000.

may lock you out of the quiz. The training, including reading the modules and taking the quizzes, may take approximately 4 to 5 hours. Remember to read all of the instructions while logged on to the training.

Upon completion of your last module, you will be asked to notify the UNR OHRP that you have finished the on-line course. The training website provides instructions for how to submit notification of completion of UNR's institutional page. To receive a passing score, you must correctly answer 75 percent overall of the quiz. Once you have received an institutional notification from the UNR OHRP, you may conduct human subjects research.

Step 3 P Seeking IRB Approval to Conduct Survey: Do not change the questionnaire or protocol without seeking additional IRB approval.

Once you have received institutional certification, you may submit required documentation to obtain approval of your research. Instructions are available at the UNR OHRP's website (www.unr.edu/ohrp/Forms.htm). Your study protocol will determine what information and forms you need to provide. All proposed research requires that you submit a description of study. Your survey instrument, including all letters sent to participants, must be included with this packet.

In order to conduct a formal needs assessment involving surveys, you must submit an application and study description to the UNR OHRP that describes the survey, the sample and participant selection process. The study description should explain why you are conducting the survey, how you will implement it and what you plan to do with the results. You must include, with your application, a copy of the questionnaire as well as any other supporting documents, including cover letters, thank you notes and reminders.

Should you vary protocol without first seeking UNR OHRP approval, UNR may not provide support should any negative or legal actions arise.

Once the UNR OHRP approves your research, you cannot vary the protocol, questionnaire or any supporting documents without first obtaining approval from the IRB. Should you vary your protocol without first seeking IRB approval, UNR may not provide support should any negative or legal actions arise.

Step 4 P Implement needs assessment, record responses and analyze the data.

After the survey is complete, there are a number of software packages available to record and analyze data. You may record numeric responses using Microsoft Excel which is available as part of Microsoft Office suite software. You may also use Microsoft Excel to compute basic descriptive statistics, including percentages, mean and standard deviation. For needs assessment reports designed for lay audiences, including fact sheets, this level of statistical analysis is adequate. You may also record written comments using this software.

If you wish to conduct a more rigorous statistical analysis, including analysis of variance, linear regression and Chi-square, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)

may be used. A current copy may be purchased through University Computing Services (<http://www.scs.nevada.edu/>).

Step 5 P Publish an extension fact sheet, special publication or bulletin to share the results of your needs assessment.

Extension publications such as fact sheets, special publications and bulletins are useful to both the public and colleagues. Fact sheets are limited typically to four pages and as such provide a brief, but descriptive, summary of the findings. Similarly, special publications provide an opportunity to share needs assessment results through a simple summary and may be longer than four pages. A bulletin is an extensive treatment of a topic and as such can detail every aspect of a needs assessment from beginning to end.

Once you analyze the data, you may share your findings through any of these publication formats. At the very least, publishing a fact sheet is strongly recommended. Fact sheets tend to be popular with citizens, as they require little reading time in order to get the gist of the research findings. Also, you can affordably mail fact sheets to citizens.

Summary

Formal needs assessments can help extension professionals develop useful programs that have significant and lasting impacts. This fact sheet outlined a 5-step survey approach to identify needs. The steps are: 1) Develop questions and determine protocol; 2) Seek approval from Office of Human Research Protection IRB; 3) Implement the survey being careful not to change the questionnaire or protocol without seeking additional IRB approval; 4) Record the responses and analyze the data; and 5) Publish a fact sheet to share the results of your needs assessment.

A well-executed needs assessment provides extension personnel with critical community information. These survey results, and analysis, will serve as the basis upon which to build meaningful programs. Because formal needs assessments are necessary, and required, it is important that extension personnel understand the process involved.

References

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