

Using Mixed Methodology in Assessing Community Needs

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Abstract: The findings from this study and the proposed theoretical framework contribute to an integrative theory of evaluation research in the Agricultural Extension field. Creswell's (2014), sequential exploratory methodology was utilized in this pilot study. The research objective was to identify future demand for Extension programming. We conducted a two-phased approach. The community market analysis approach represented Phase I of this study, while Phase II utilized a qualitative technique - discussion groups to identify community assets and needs. An urban county in the state was selected as a pilot project for identifying the demand for future Extension programming. Intermediate results of research showed that future Extension programming should focus on work readiness among low-income youth and adults, education-level concerns, low-level of acceptance of differences and diversity of communities, changes and barriers related to family structure, social and cultural norms, poverty cycle, healthy lifestyle, healthy and safe neighborhoods. The most important identified assets were emerging technologies in agriculture, opportunities in urban agriculture, existing facilities and resources, actively engaged and collaborative citizens. Appropriate recommendations were made for urban county communities and residents that will help to resolve local concerns without relying on external funding. We recommended the implementation of a mixed methodology approach to needs assessment that will complement a traditional Extension needs assessment. Mixed methodology will help to mobilize community's assets, resources, strength, and opportunities available to address the identified needs. The findings will be used by Extension educators to design future programs and not extensively rely on external financial aid.

Key words: mixed methodology, asset-based approach to needs assessment, market research approach, dine and dialogue technique.

Introduction

A systematic process of needs assessment for health and human services and education has been used in the United States since 1960 (Witkin, 1984). A needs assessment movement was associated with obtaining consensus between a community's goals and needs (Witkin, 1984). Cooperative Extension organizations used needs assessment to identify future community needs, develop and deliver educational programs based on identified needs. This traditional approach to needs assessment has been widely criticized since the 1970s (Alschuld 2015; Altschuld & Kumar; 2009). Major concerns about the "traditional approach" were:

- Fully quantitative and not people-oriented;
- High cost of the needs assessment procedure;
- No funding sources are identified to support addressing the identified problem;
- Lack of appropriate an method to put the data together;
- Negativity of the needs assessment does not support an uplifting concept;

- Absence of evaluation of cost against benefits in the reports; and
- Needs assessments are always hierarchical and top-down where the voices of the target population are not included

Purpose

The purpose of this pilot study was to overcome the weaknesses of a traditional or single-approach research method by using an integrative methodology in assessing future demand for Extension programming. In this study researchers used a modified (adapted from Creswell (2014)) sequential exploratory methodology and report intermediate results of this study. We suggest the use in the Extension arena this innovative and/or integrative approach to a methodology that allows the evaluator to assess local community resources/assets and citizen's needs.

Conceptual Framework

Mixed Methodology

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. Mixed methodologies in research and evaluation have been widely accepted for the last decade in the social and behavioral sciences (Creswell, 2014). Mixed methods research only emerged in the past 30 years and has become more popular than just single quantitative or qualitative approaches. One of the reasons the mixed methods is more effective than a single approach is it can address both exploratory and confirmatory questions at the same time. Another strength of the mixed methods approach is the balance of the disadvantages in a single research approach and this method provides stronger inferences (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009).

Needs Assessment and Emergent Hybrid (Asset-Based) Approach of Needs Assessment

To overcome the negativity of the traditional needs assessments, a parallel approach known as asset/capacity-building became the trend in many fields such as public health and social programming. The asset/capacity-building approach focuses on the positives of an organization or community and builds a culture of change utilizing the strengths available or potentially available (Altschuld, 2015).

The hybrid approach is recommended when we do not know enough about both assets and needs in the community. Unlike a traditional needs assessment, the asset/capacity building assessment recognizes the strengths of the given community. Another aspect of asset/capacity-building assessments is that it's led by community members making it a participatory "bottom-up" approach. Using this approach, communities build and maintain relationships and develop their own communities allowing them to be independent (Dedrick, Mitchell, Miyagawa, and Roberts, 1997).

Both asset-based capacity building and traditional needs assessment have been in play in community development but only since 2015, when Dr. James Altschuld wrote his book "Bridging the Gap Between Asset/Capacity Building and Needs Assessment", were the two ideas synthesized and presented with examples for application in communities. Altschuld (2015) recommended starting with group discussions; where participants form two groups, one to identify assets the other to identify needs, then the groups come together to discuss the findings and further actions. In case the number of participants is not large enough to be divided into two groups, the group should discuss assets first and then needs. For more community involvement

and next steps in the data collection process, Altschuld (2015) suggested using some of the following techniques: focus group interviews, nominal group technique, surveys, interview with key informants, photo-voice, and observation.

Using Market Research Approach in Needs Assessment

In 2006, Comer, Campbell, Edwards, and Hillison wrote that understanding past and current trends is highly important when we plan future Extension programming. Voss, Tordella, and Brown (1987) emphasized that secondary data analysis is an integral part of the community needs assessment that provides approximation in community change and opportunities. As a logical continuation of using secondary data analysis for community assessment, we proposed to utilize Raymond's (1987) recommendations of a market research approach for Extension in identifying future demand for educational programming. The philosophy of the market approach for Extension involves "scanning the environment" to identify the needs of clientele, target audiences, and match Extension's programs with audience needs" (p.1).

The Cooperative Extension Service offers programming to a unique service market segment - non-formal education. Extension professionals develop and deliver research-based learning activities and non-formal education to individuals in rural, suburban and urban communities. The non-formal education segment represents a part of an overall education service market with distinctive characteristics.

Rust and Huang (2014) noted that transformative service market 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).

Market research focuses on a specific market with distinctive characteristics. This approach combines both secondary and primary data collection and analysis. According to Johnson, Miller, Miller, Summers (1987) secondary data analysis refers to the study of community related information. Secondary data analysis helps identify key issues and social problems in a community. Moreover, it takes into consideration all the concerns of the community while developing the survey instrument for primary data collection. Social and community indicators can be found through analysis of demographics, economic and income level of community residents, educational level, occupational status, local business and industries data and other valuable information that is provided by government, research and non-profit institutions (Johnson et. al., 1987).

Research Objective and Design

The research objective is to identify future demand for Extension programming at the community level. This study utilized mixed methods including qualitative and quantitative research. How do we identify priorities, needs, and future programs? To answer these questions and identify future demand/need for Extension programming, Ohio State University Extension applied a two-phase approach: Phase I is a research-based market approach, while Phase II is a mixed methodology of an asset-based approach to needs assessment.

Phase 1. The market analysis approach focuses on a unique service market segment (i.e., non-formal education). The purpose of a research-based market approach for Extension programming is to identify non-formal educational demand through the comprehensive examination of local community resources, assets and trends. 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. Other primary data collection techniques, such as a "Quality of Life/Extension programming needs" instrument are currently being developed and will be used as a continuation of this current research.

For phase II of the asset-based approach to needs assessment (hybrid approach) Altschuld (2015), suggested the use of both quantitative and qualitative techniques for data collection. The decision of which techniques of the data collection to be used depends on characteristics of the target group, the type of information intended to gather, time and cost, the size of the community, and the degree of interaction desired with the community (Altschuld & Kumar 2009). The asset-based approach to needs assessment was used as phase 2 in this research. The approach used during the dialogue sessions was a hybrid approach of the assets/capacity building and needs assessment known as an "asset-based approach to needs assessment". The "dine and dialogue" session is just one of the techniques that was used to gather qualitative data about the community. Extensive market analysis and a review of secondary data are also being used for comprehensive examination community trend, structure, gaps, and opportunity.

Data Collection

An urban county in the state was selected as a pilot county for identifying the demand for future Extension programming.

For Phase 1, the market report for the county 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 data was gathered from the U.S. Bureaus of Census, Labor Statistics, and Economic Analysis; administrative records and local historical records were also used.

For Phase 2, a discussion group with the county Extension advisory committee was utilized. Franklin County Extension Advisory Committee members were invited to participate in a discussion group during a lunch meeting. County Extension Advisory Committee members represented local leaders from Franklin County institutions and organizations. Nine committee members participated in the group discussion group.

Discussion Group – technical procedure

In September 2016, a discussion group with Franklin County Extension Advisory committee members was conducted. Upon arrival, the participants were randomly assigned into two groups. Each group had a facilitator; one group was guided to identify assets in Franklin County and the other group was guided to identify issues or concerns/needs of Franklin County. Below are the steps, which were similar to the two-groups “assets” and “needs” outlined by Altschuld (2015) in his book:

1. Participants were guided to individually brainstorm then write down a short phrase or keywords of their ideas on assets/strengths OR issues/concerns in their community
2. Participants were then asked to cluster the assets OR concerns identified into groups
3. Participants shared their individual ideas and combined their thoughts into a final list
4. Each group was guided to discuss the other group’s work
5. Each group was given the work of the other group to review and provide comments or recommendations (thru the use of a guided list of questions) to enrich the existing list of ideas

The time assigned for the discussion was 90 minutes but the actual discussion took about 120 minutes. Groups identified several issues/concerns and assets/strengths for the purpose of this paper we are sharing the most important ones as agreed upon by the group’s members.

Results

Results of Phase 1

Based on the results of the market analysis for Franklin County, we identified and synthesized the following possible future Extension programming efforts:

- 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
- 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
- Assistance with single parenting issues
- Chronic disease management
- Healthy lifestyle practices
- Challenges in changing family structure
- Unintentional falls and injuries among children under 16 and adults over age 45
- New technologies in agriculture
- Woman in farming
- Urban farming
- Hobby farms in urban and suburban environments
- Biosecurity on the farm

Results of Phase 2

A summary report was generated from the qualitative data generated during the dine and dialogue session. There were major themes identified for the community’s assets and needs.

Defined community assets included:

- Cultural attraction
- Active millennials/citizens
- Unique demographic
- Education
- Community resources
- Food access, and
- Community programs addressing poverty.

Defined needs comprised the following:

- Education
- Housing
- Employment
- Safety, and
- Social norms.

Summarizing the two phases – the most important issues and concerns that were found are: work readiness among low-income youth and adults, education-level concerns, low level of acceptance of differences and diversity of communities, changes and barriers related to family structure, social and cultural norms, poverty cycle, healthy lifestyle, healthy and safe neighborhoods. The most important identified assets are: emerging technologies in agriculture, opportunities in urban agriculture, existing facilities and resources, actively engaged and collaborative citizens.

Recommendations

The intermediate results of this two-phased research allowed researchers to provide the following recommendations to Franklin County communities and residents that will help resolve some concerns without relying on an external funding. Among them were:

- Better connections and coordination among local organizations and agencies serving the people
- Issue-based problem solving
- Grassroots-driven and representative participation in the community
- Incorporating STEM/socialwork education opportunities in K-12 setting (service learning, real-life challenges)
- Employee/Employer service sponsored activities
- Recreate collaborative/idea exchange opportunities in rural areas (greater education of real impact)
- Mentoring program; model for business and organization (Peer-to-peer)
- Big table; The Columbus Foundation facilitated discussions with more than 5000 residents to foster understanding across the region. The group recommended more of the big table-style conversation.

Conclusion

Analyzing community needs is one of the key steps in the Extension program planning process. We recommended the use of a mixed methodology approach to needs assessment that will complement a traditional Extension needs assessment. Mixed methodology will help to

mobilize community's assets, resources, strengths, and opportunities available to address the identified needs. The findings will be used by Extension educators to design future programs.

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