



NEEDS ASSESSMENTS: A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY-BASED YOUTH INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Many communities could benefit from assistance in areas related to strategic planning. Our hope is that by providing insight into planning processes, and guidance about implementing those processes in the Youth Initiatives Portfolio, community-wide youth efforts will more often be approached comprehensively and strategically. We have chosen to explore **needs assessments** in the first iteration of the Portfolio because this process is critical at various stages in the development and implementation of community-wide youth initiatives. A needs assessment is a process that helps explore the magnitude of opportunities and/or problems, and that provides insight about what needs to be done to address them. Needs assessments are similar to evaluations in many ways, but one key difference is that they can, and should, be conducted before a program is implemented in order to guide its development.

NOTE: In addition to referencing articles about needs assessment, the actual process undertaken by the Meyerhoff Teen Initiative (MTI) in Baltimore is cited as a case study.

STEP ONE: DECIDING IF A NEEDS ASSESSMENT SHOULD BE CONDUCTED

“Need” can be defined as a “gap or discrepancy between what is now and what ought to be in the future.”¹ There are many different types of needs, including:

- *Normative need* – an individual or group falls below the norm or expectation of some established group (e.g., a low percentage of unaffiliated youth are participating in community-wide programs);
- *Felt need* – someone feels that something ought to be done (e.g., there should be a space for teens in a Jewish communal organization);
- *Expressed need* – there is more demand for a good, service or article than there is a supply (e.g., Jewish residential camps report long waiting lists);
- *Comparative need* – there are no existing facilities or provisions in a certain area or serving a certain population (e.g., few, if any, programs exist for youth with special needs); and

¹ Robertta H. Barba, Edit 186 Interactive Syllabus, San Jose State University (1997).
www.sjsu.edu/depts/it/edit186/typneed.html

- *Anticipated or future needs* – a need that does not exist at the current time but is predicted for some future date (e.g., follow up programming for returnees from newly developed intensive experiences).²

Once a need is perceived, it can be tempting to immediately develop a plan to address it. However, such temptation should be resisted because:

1. It is important to fully understand a problem or opportunity before trying to address it.³ Needs are subjective by nature. One person's commodity is another's luxury. Efforts should be made during needs assessments to develop more objectivity on what are the communal needs;
2. It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that one knows what one's "customers" want or need. All too often, these assumptions are not fully accurate. It is therefore imperative to get input directly from the users or potential users of the service;⁴
3. It is much easier to identify and define a need than to develop valid estimates of its density and distribution.⁵ For example, while it may seem that a sports league is needed, it is important to learn more about who, specifically, would participate, where and when the programs should be held, etc.

A needs assessment should be conducted at any and all points during the life of a program (from initial development through implementation and evaluation) when having a better understanding of the needs of the target audience and/or users and/or the sponsoring institution(s) would benefit either the people or the organizations involved.

Conducting a needs assessment can help determine:

- if there is a need for a new program
- if there is a need to re-design an existing program
- what type of program to design/redesign; and/or
- if the perceived "problem" is really a problem that should be addressed by a given entity.⁶

A Case Study: The Meyerhoff Teen Initiative

In Baltimore, the primary goal of the Meyerhoff Teen Initiative (MTI) when it was established in 1998 was to design a new approach to involve uninvolved Jewish teens in the Baltimore area. A perception existed that there were large numbers of Jewish teens who were not participating in existing programs. The initiative was designed as a three-part project including: research and analysis, design, and

² Ibid

³ Barry O. Williams, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Needs Assessments but Were Afraid to Ask – Penn State University. www.courses.psu.edu/trdev/trdev518_bow100/N_Apresent/sld001.html

⁴ Nonprofit Charitable Orgs. <http://Nonprofit.about.com/library/weekly/aa091599.htm?iam=dpile&terms=%2Bho>

⁵ Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, *Evaluation – A Systemic Approach* (1989), page 76.

⁶ Barry O. Williams, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Needs Assessments but Were Afraid to Ask – Penn State University. www.courses.psu.edu/trdev/trdev518_bow100/N_Apresent/sld001.html

implementation and results evaluation.⁷ The beginning phase during which data were collected from and about their target population was a comprehensive needs assessment. This process was designed to enable MTI leadership to develop the structure to help them achieve their goals and objectives. It should be noted that, from the outset, MTI built in an evaluation process to assess its efforts and to review the lessons learned from their initial needs assessment, in order to ensure their continued validity.

STEP TWO: GETTING STARTED

As with any process, needs assessment is most effectively carried out when a plan is developed before any “actual work” is begun. It has been suggested that there are five stages in developing an effective needs assessment, including:

1. Determining appropriate formats for the needs assessment (partially based on an understanding of what data is available and/or desired, and a decision about who will be conducting the needs assessment);
2. Gathering data using methods appropriate for the situation;
3. Analyzing the data (usually both quantitative and qualitative analyses are helpful);
4. Preparing and presenting a clear report that answers the questions posed when deciding to conduct a needs assessment (keeping in mind the audience for the report); and
5. Developing recommendations to address issues identified by the needs assessment.⁸

Some helpful tips to keep in mind:

- When beginning to conduct the needs assessment, it is critical to document specific findings. For example, reporting that “ten current participants indicated that the program should be offered on Monday and Wednesday rather than Tuesday and Thursday” is much more helpful than reporting, “We spoke with a few people who said they do not participate in the program because it is inconvenient for them.”⁹
- Make sure you know whether anyone else is providing a comparable service.¹⁰
- If you decide to conduct original research, consider providing a small gift as an incentive for participating in the research. (JESNA has successfully employed this strategy in many of its recent research efforts.)¹¹

STEP THREE: TYPES OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO CONSIDER

There are many different ways to determine the nature and extent of needs, and also to develop recommendations for addressing needs. Generally, “needs

⁷ Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

⁸ Nancy A. Bois, Training & Development– Needs Assessments. <http://Common.css.edu/staff/nbois/TDNeeds.html>

⁹ Nonprofit Charitable Orgs. <http://Nonprofit.about.com/library/weekly/aa091599.htm?iam=dpile&terms=%2Bho>

¹⁰ Nonprofit Charitable Orgs. <http://Nonprofit.about.com/library/weekly/aa091599.htm?iam=dpile&terms=%2Bho>

¹¹ Nonprofit Charitable Orgs. <http://Nonprofit.about.com/library/weekly/aa091599.htm?iam=dpile&terms=%2Bho>

assessment” is the term given to the process by which the nature of the problem or opportunity is determined.¹² It is a process by which problems or opportunities can be identified, and recommendations developed, to bridge the gap between the current and ideal status.¹³ In fact, “anytime someone carefully asks the question, “How can I find out what is really happening (or needed; at the root of the problem; missing; etc.)?” a needs assessment has begun. ¹⁴

A needs assessment might focus on what each of the various groups associated or potentially associated with a program might want in the way of new or changed services.¹⁵ Such groups could include current users, potential users, previous but not current users, non-users and/or the general public.

The research effort involved in needs assessments can be as inexpensive as copying relevant information from printed volumes... or as costly as several years of effort designing, conducting, and analyzing a large-scale sample survey. ¹⁶

There are many valid methodologies to assist in developing an accurate understanding of the need(s) and of the depth and/or breadth of the need(s). In order to determine how to best conduct a needs assessment in any given set of circumstances, one should first determine how much reliable data exists, if any. In cases when no formal data is available, there are alternative ways to learn about the problem or opportunity.¹⁷

When conducting original research, possible methodologies can include:

- Gathering feedback from users, potential users, previous but not current users, non users and/or the general public;
- Reviewing records from organizations that provide services to the population in question;
- Direct observations; and
- Obtaining “testimony” from “experts.”

These methodologies vary in many ways, primarily with regard to cost, complexity, and validity/reliability. Certainly, the easiest and often least expensive, but usually not the most valid or reliable research strategy, involves gathering feedback from people determined to be “experts”. Experts should be drawn either from the field at-large (e.g., social action programming for teens) or a key component of the

¹² Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, Evaluation – A Systemic Approach (1989), page 67.

¹³ Barry O. Williams, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Needs Assessments but Were Afraid to Ask – Penn State University. www.courses.psu.edu/trdev/trdev518_bow100/N_Apresent/sld001.html

¹⁴ Tips & Techniques – Needs Assessment - Cornell University Trainer Network (1995-6). www.cornell.edu/OHR/TNET/NeedsAssess.html

¹⁵ Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, Evaluation – A Systemic Approach (1989), page 90.

¹⁶ Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, Evaluation – A Systemic Approach (1989), page 93.

¹⁷ Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, Evaluation – A Systemic Approach (1989), page 81-2.

program and/or its implementation (e.g., the sponsoring organization(s), a geographic neighborhood, the target audience).

What makes expert testimony less valid is that generally, the information provided is unique to the direct experience of the person providing the information. Nevertheless, this type of data is better than having no data at all, and is relatively inexpensive to obtain. When interviewing experts, the experts should be chosen and then interviewed very carefully, making sure that questions are not too leading, and that any reservations or qualifications that they may have about their testimony are obtained.¹⁸

In addition, it is critical that the person(s) conducting the needs assessment be chosen after careful thought has been given to the process. Again, many options exist. Often, there is someone in-house able to gather feedback and/or provide “expert” testimony. And, there are many people who engage in this type of evaluation work as their profession. There are benefits to engaging someone local who is more familiar with a particular set of circumstances, but there are also benefits to working with someone who is more distant from a community and/or more objective about it and its programmatic and other resources. There is no right or wrong way to proceed; options should be weighed thoughtfully.

A Case Study: The Meyerhoff Teen Initiative

The Meyerhoff Teen Initiative collected and analyzed its data over a period of 6 months, from January through June 1999.

“Primary research for the MTI consisted of two sets of focus groups. In the first set, a Baltimore-based market research firm, carried out 10 focus groups: 8 of Jewishly uninvolved teens and 2 of Jewishly active teens (for comparison).

The goals of the focus groups were to understand Jewishly uninvolved teens’ lifestyles, Jewish identity, lack of participation in Jewish activities (including the role of parents in inactivity), and motivators to get them more involved.

It was then decided to initiate a set of focus groups of students in grades 7-8, all of whom were in the midst of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience. An independent consultant convened 3 focus groups of Baltimore teens in grades 7-8. They discussed the Hebrew high program, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, spirituality/religion, and role models.”¹⁹

Following these focus groups, MTI conducted secondary research study. This was done in order to “broaden the scope of the study and understand the latest thinking

¹⁸ Peter H. Rossi and Howard E. Freeman, Evaluation – A Systemic Approach (1989), page 82.

¹⁹ Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

on the state of Jewish teens.” As suggested earlier, MTI carefully selected experts from whom testimonies were received.

“(MTI) explored research conducted in other Jewish communities and gathered information on teen lifestyles from research in the general community. Research was done on similar projects in the Christian community, hoping to gain insight from their experiences with the same questions about teens’ involvement in the religious community and sense of religious identity. All of the findings in this search supported the findings of the primary (Baltimore) research.

In all, there were several daylong strategic planning conferences as well as many extensive conference call sessions over the six-month period of January – June 1999. Participating in these were Meyerhoff family members, key Hillel staff and consultants, and community partners.

It was determined that it was important and necessary to:

- Identify models from around the nation and aim to achieve similar goals and the “best practices” associated with these models
- Interview Jewish youth professionals working in Baltimore and complete an inventory of services, programs, and staffing targeting the teen population

Two site visits were conducted: the first to the Jewish Experiences for Teens (JET) Program housed at the Federation of Greater Washington, D.C., and the second to the Youth Education Initiative in Boston, housed at the Bureau of Jewish Education. In each case there was opportunity to discuss the many successes and challenges of the programs and their work with teens.”²⁰

Additionally,

“Fourteen interviews were conducted face-to-face and several in-depth telephone interviews were included in the data collection process. There was individual staff representation from four major Federation agencies, and from the Reform and Conservative Movements.”²¹

Collected data included opinions about: strengths of the current offerings, major obstacles to engaging teens, and what was most needed in the community to help increase the number of Jewish teens participating in activities with other Jewish teens.²²

²⁰ Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

²¹ Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

²² Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

STEP FOUR: WHAT TO DO WITH FINDINGS

After the agreed-upon data has been collected and analyzed, recommendations are developed. The recommendations should relate directly to what was learned through the research, and also to the initial questions that led to the conducting of the needs assessment.

A Case Study: The Meyerhoff Teen Initiative

The MTI needs assessment was designed to develop both a better understanding of local involved and uninvolved teens and a series of strategies to reach out to the less involved youth. Following the research stage, recommendations were posed based on the noted relevant findings. For example:

1. Many noted that a coordinated effort was needed to enhance programs already in place and to create new programs. Therefore, it was decided to create a central communal clearinghouse for programs, information and resources.
2. It was felt that in order to help increase the number of teens participating in high caliber programming, funding should be provided to encourage the development of new and exciting opportunities for teens. Therefore, a recommendation was made to provide community-wide program grants.
3. In order to enable teen workers to reach their potential and work most effectively with local teens more comprehensively, it was suggested that professional development opportunities be created.²³

Appropriately, these recommendations relate directly to the original questions which the research was designed to address.

WHERE TO TURN FOR HELP

When contemplating a needs assessment, there are resources available to provide assistance. MTI engaged local resources to facilitate their needs assessment, and benefited greatly from their experience and expertise.

On a national level, JESNA consults with local communities around a myriad of issues, and can provide suggestions for methodologies and/or people to work on needs assessments. Also, JESNA can provide information about “experts” in various fields. Please contact us!

CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that three key components contribute to high-caliber, utility-focused and user-friendly needs assessments:

1. Careful planning – developing consensus around questions to be researched and methodologies/people to be employed to conduct that research

²³ Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Teen Initiative CD-ROM (1999).

2. Asking the 'right' questions ... – making sure that the methods chosen and the tools developed will provide the necessary information
3. ... Of the 'right' people -- determining what set of people should be involved in assessing the need(s).²⁴

Needs assessments, processes through which one gains a better understanding of what is needed and by whom, can help ensure that services are designed to likely achieve their goals and objectives. At any stage in program development, implementation and/or evaluation, we encourage you to conduct a needs assessment. We are confident that the lessons you learn will greatly enhance your efforts.

²⁴ Barry O. Williams, Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Needs Assessments but Were Afraid to Ask – Penn State University. www.courses.psu.edu/trdev/trdev518_bow100/N_Apresent/sld001.html

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