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Using Community Assessments to Improve 4-H Youth Development Programming Efforts

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Abstract

Understanding resources available in a community is essential before any 4-H youth development professional can begin addressing local needs. Conducting a community assessment generates valuable information about the unique components and resources of a specific community. This information then provides a foundation for identifying specific community needs and determining ways in which needs can be addressed through Extension-based programming.

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Introduction

Understanding the needs and resources available in a community is essential for any 4-H youth development professional. Community assessments provide valuable information about the unique components of a specific area and should lead to the creation of strategies for programmatic attention. If you are a 4-H youth development professional, you can use the information and templates we include here to understand and implement community assessments.

Understanding Community Assessments

A community assessment gives you the opportunity to thoroughly understand a community and recognize areas where the 4-H youth development program can enhance and support the community. There are several ways in which a community assessment can be useful to you. Through a community assessment, you can increase your overall understanding of the community, identify other youth development programs and initiatives, find potential community partners, locate existing available data, and gather information that will be helpful in conducting strategic planning, setting priorities, identifying program outcomes, and making program improvements (Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center, 2010).

A quality community assessment should include the following information:

- general county demographics (e.g., resident demographics, employment rates, prominent industry, population hubs, population size),

- overview of the educational system (e.g., primary and secondary schools, enrollment figures, alternative education options, rates of students receiving free and reduced-price school lunches [as a measurement of community economics], higher education institutions),

- overview of all community programs, especially those that may involve youth programming (including the specific county 4-H program),

- identification of local leaders and stakeholders in the community and community member attitudes, and

- a review of current community efforts and priorities.

This information provides the foundation for identifying specific community needs and determining ways in which needs are addressed through Extension-based programming. It is important for 4-H youth development professionals to use research and data to support programmatic efforts. By conducting a thorough community assessment, you become aware of the agencies and programs already in place and how they meet the needs of families and children in the county and you identify potential partners for future Extension programming (Caravella, 2006).

Templates for Gathering Community Assessment Data

The templates in this section offer a starting point for conducting a quality community assessment. As needed, add or customize areas of investigation to reflect aspects of the community you are assessing.

It is essential to begin with a general understanding of the demographics of the community. Figure 1 shows a framework for gathering basic information about your community.

Figure 1.
General County Demographics

Population Breakdown: General: 0–4:   5–18:   19–55:   over 55:
Gender:
Race/Ethnicity:
Population Hubs:
Employment Rate:
Major Industries:

Size (square miles, geography, etc.):

Reviewing background information about the community education system is important. Figure 2 indicates the information needed to thoroughly understand the educational system in your community.

Figure 2.

Educational System Components

Number of School Districts:
K–12 Schools: Pre-K Schools: Alternative Education Programs:
Enrollment:
Race/Ethnicity:
Free and Reduced Lunch Rates (indicators of income level of community):
Higher Education: Community Colleges and Universities:
Other:

It is important to recognize that 4-H youth development is just one part of community programming for youths and families. Figure 3 addresses the programs that could be available for youths and families in your community.

Figure 3.

Community Programs

Youth Development Programs:
Current 4-H Program Enrollment:
  Number of Youths and Volunteers:
  Breakdown of 4-H Project Involvement:
Description of Extension Youth Programming:

Out-of-School Activities:
Civic Organizations:
Senior Centers:
Libraries:
Community Centers:

Faith-Based Organizations:
Other:

Quantitative data, such as survey data and demographics, comprise one aspect of a community assessment, and these data often are easy to find and analyze. However, there is value in using qualitative methods in a community assessment to collect information about the general feelings and attitudes of community members. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods when conducting a community assessment creates stronger data to support programmatic emphases than either method can produce alone (Smith & Lincoln, 1984). Examples of the types of information gathered through qualitative methods include community excitement over a new and innovative project, the sense of loss over a factory or mill closing, turmoil due to a recent natural disaster, or uncertainty due to a political climate. Figure 4 offers a starting point for capturing community attitude.

Figure 4.

Community Leadership and Culture

County/City Government Structure: County Leaders:
Sense of Pride in the Community:
Key Leadership Organizations:
Economic Situation:
Political Climate:
Other:

Perhaps the most important element of community assessment is the continuous gathering of information. You cannot simply send out a few surveys and obtain census data once to complete your community assessment. A thorough community assessment is ongoing and evolves over time.

Resources for Community Data

Many tools and resources provide data about youths and families in local communities. Reports such as those found on county and state health department websites, local school district census data (http://www.census.gov/), Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count data (http://www.aecf.org/work/kids-count/), Search Institute data (http://www.search-institute.org/), state-specific information such as that provided by the State of Washington's Healthy Youth Survey, and information from other nonprofit organizations, such as United Way, all can be starting points for gaining an understanding of a community.

Application

A needs assessment can follow from the information gained from a community assessment. A needs

assessment requires investigators to first define the existing situation, the "what is" condition for current and potential stakeholders, and then collectively engage those stakeholders in defining "what should be." The difference between the two conditions can then be defined as the "need" or "gap," but only if the gap is measurable and real consequences exist for not addressing it (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010, p. 3).

When you pair comprehensive, ongoing community assessment with a quality needs assessment, you acquire a big-picture view of a community and a great understanding of opportunities for intentional educational programming.

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