OL 201. Designing & Funding Nonprofit Programs 1: From the Ground Up.
Discussion on Participatory Needs Assessments for your Non Profit

In our recent nonprofit survey "What Can't You Get Done in Your Work Week?" respondents prioritized four areas that were challenging to them.

The first challenge was: "Failing to design a project that will solve challenges faced by their constituents areas needing help." Respondents felt they needed help in:
- 57%: clearly identifying underlying causes for challenges that needs to be solved
- 82%: finding solutions which have shown evidence of success

One Potential Solution: Participatory Needs Assessments. Conducting a community needs and asset assessment allows us to gauge need, its underlying causes—and also identify community assets which could be used in support of the project. Researching scientific studies about the underlying causes can provide us with information on solutions which have shown evidence of solving them. Developing project management documents using this solid information can help lead to funding and project management successes.

Understanding community members' perception of their needs can be tremendously helpful both in providing services that are the most appropriate for your constituents— and also in learning more about the causes underlying their challenges.

An assessment will also help you determine if your perception of need really exists, if another nonprofit is already providing this service, and it will help you more clearly determine precisely who your constituents are. You can also gain greater knowledge on the numbers of people needing your services.

So how does one go about assessing need for a community from their point of view? Certainly, studies have been done that you can glean information from: specialists of practice may have conducted surveys, perhaps the city that you live in has conducted surveys as well. Certainly, you should research this information and study it carefully.

However, that said, there's nothing quite like assessing community need by actually sitting down with representative members of the community that you serve and asking them. They will not only be able to provide you with information about their needs—they will also be able to share insights into the causes underlying these needs and challenges. It is these underlying causes that you need to identify solutions for.

In a participatory needs assessment your community members are participating with you in the assessment of their need. They are part of the process. Simply opening up this dialogue will begin to develop for them a sense of ownership of an evolving project design. This sense of ownership can lead to their becoming part of the solution and maintaining positive outcomes for the long-term.

So, how do you conduct a needs assessment? Who do you interview—and how do you do it? Nonprofits have a wide range of programs that they manage or hope to develop; some simple, some complex. At the end of this discussion are a series of resources that will help you make a decision about the best method to use in your specific context. Many of them provide workbooks and sample forms that you can use for conducting assessments.

So let's look at a couple of project ideas. Let's say that you work for an animal shelter—and you want to develop a new project to present to donors. What community would you interview for a participatory needs assessment? Your community of dogs? Your community of cats? Probably not. However, we could consider approaching your organization's other stakeholders. A stakeholder is a person or a group that has an interest the services that you provide.

If you are going to build a dam on the edge of a wilderness area, your stakeholders would be quite diverse, and may not be in agreement with each other. You might have people in need of electricity further downstream, you might have environmentalists concerned about damage to the wilderness area, you might have concerned from cattle ranchers about negative impacts the dam might have, and then there are government regulatory agencies.

However, in the area of animal welfare, you might find a number of stakeholders that are essentially on the same side that you could interview to find out what their perception of need is.
- people who bring animals in for adoption
- people who've adopted animals
- people who are considering buying or adopting an animal
- veterinarians who have helped your shelter
- staff at your city's animal control unit
- your city's parks department

Each of these stakeholder communities will voice slightly different needs because of their unique perspective, but my guess is they will typically be in support of a new project you might be developing. The results from a survey would help you to more clearly identify what your specific project could—and will also help you to understand the underlying causes to the needs voiced by these different people.

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You may find new project ideas and opportunities. For example you may discover that:
- families that are hoping to buy a puppy may not realize the benefits of adult dogs—such as that they are housebroken
- your city's animal control unit is considering outsourcing some of their work—and this could become an important source of revenue for you
- the parks department would like to partner with you on developing a new dog park
- veterinarians would be interested in Saturday morning clinics at your shelter that would provide greater visibility for both them and you

Let's look at another and potentially simpler idea. Let's say that you work or volunteer for an urban food bank. In a similar fashion to the example above you might find a number of stakeholders that are in agreement and interested in working together. These could be:
- the elderly visiting your food bank
- families trapped in poverty visiting your food bank
- a family temporarily out of work visiting your food bank
- homeless people visiting your food bank

If you stop right there and just interview your program's beneficiaries—this would be a pure participatory needs assessment. You then could simply design a project from the results of the assessment.

You could also, however, pick a stakeholder from the list below to include in an assessment much like we did with the animal shelter above. Or, you could stick with the pure participatory needs assessment and share the results with the groups below when you approach them for assistance.
- staff members of your city's Department of Health and Human Services
- churches members hoping to partner
- a volunteer organization hoping to place volunteers
- restaurants and grocery stores willing to donate surplus food
- farmers willing to donate surplus food
- nutritionists with knowledge on poverty and obesity

You may find interesting project ideas and opportunities in Food Banks too. For example:
- the elderly find it difficult to get to your food bank and to stand in line
- many of your constituents live in a different part of town than where your food bank is
- a nutritionist suggests that you should try to stock a greater diversity of food for increased health
- your city's Department of Health and Human Services has been toying with the idea of food delivery for the elderly
- restaurants are reluctant to make donations because of perceived hassle factor
- grocery stores are reluctant to make donations because of perceived hassle factor
- farmers would be happy to make donations—but transportation is an issue

In each of these two examples there are challenges which may be excellent opportunities for developing a new project that may be interesting to donors. There are also new opportunities: beneficial partnerships, increased donations, increased revenues, increased exposure for your organization, and new opportunities for such things as receiving help from volunteers.

How do you conduct a needs assessment? Again, because of the diversity of nonprofits and the types of projects and programs they work on, each one of you may need to use a slightly different assessment tool. Depending on the complexity of your projects and constituents, the assessment tools range from quick and simple to sophisticated to scientific. In the two examples above, your assessment technique could probably be quick and simple. If you're hoping to open a new cancer hospice center, the assessments might need to be more sophisticated.

Techniques are quite varied (and can be fun!) and can include:
- use existing data—such as municipal or scientific data
- research other nonprofits similar to yours in different cities and see if they have done any studies
- focus groups; these would be representative members of your community
- public forums; open to the community at large
- panel discussion
- launch a planning group that represents different stakeholders
- interviews with staff members of city departments
- surveys: by mail, by telephone, door-to-door, conducted at a meeting, or offered online
- hold a meeting, let people voice need, and then prioritize them by voting
- simple observations of beneficiaries
- inventory community member assets (what can your constituents provide such as time, skills, tools?)
- community mapping
- seasonal calendars

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Planning for your assessment.
- determine what data is already available
- determine what additional information you may need
- determine who should be involved in both the planning process and in conducting the assessment
- determine the specific method that you're going to use for collecting information
- determine who you should collect information from—and from how many
- determine how who is going to meet with these community members
- design an evaluation plan for the assessment
- determine who's going to analyze the data.

Again, depending on the complexity of your projects and constituents, this planning process and its individual components can range from quick and simple to sophisticated to scientific. Just below I have provided links to a number of documents that span this range of sophistication. You can look through them and decide which method will be best for you.

Please note: This is an introductory discussion for the participatory assessment assignment of our course OL 201 Designing and Funding Nonprofit Projects. This discussion is accompanied by detailed instructions for conducting a live needs assessment, specific resources that you will need for conducting the assessment, and an example of a completed assessment showing prioritized results, underlying causes to the challenges, their negative impacts, and a preliminary project concept based upon the results.

DOWNLOADABLE PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT STUDIES AND GUIDES
Participatory Evaluation Essentials
Anita M. Baker, Ed.D., Kimberly J. Sabo, Ph. D.
The Bruner Foundation
http://www.healthincommon.ca/wp-content/uploads/participatory-evaluation-essentials-for-non-profit-organizations-and-their-evaluation-partners.pdf

Developing a Plan for Assessing Local Needs and Resources
Community Tool Box
http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/develop-a-plan/main

Communities in Action: A Guide to Effective Projects
Rotary International
https://www.rotary.org/en/document/577

Urban Indian Voices: A Community-Based Participatory Research Health and Needs Assessment
Chad V. Johnson, PhD, Jami Bartgis, PhD, Jody A. Worley, PhD, Chan M. Hellman, PhD, and Russell Burkhart
http://www.niams.nih.gov/about_us/Mission_and_Purpose/Community_Outreach/Multicultural_Outreach/AIAN_WG/Bartgis_UrbanIndianVoicesCBPR.pdf

Community Toolkit: Planning Steps
Livestrong Foundation
http://www.livestrong.org/What-We-Do/Our-Actions/Professional-Tools-Training/Community-Toolkit/Planning-Steps

What Is a Needs Assessment and Why Do I Need One for a Nonprofit?
Joanne Fritz
http://nonprofit.about.com/od/nonprofitbasics/f/needsassess.htm

Needs Assessment Ideas
Craig Van Korlaar
Top Nonprofit
http://topnonprofits.com/needs-assessment-ideas/

How to Conduct a Needs Assessment for Your Nonprofit Program
Stan Hutton and Frances Phillips
Nonprofit Kit For Dummies, 4th Edition
http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-to-conduct-a-needs-assessment-for-your-nonprof.html

Conducting a Community Assessment
Strengthening Nonprofits
http://strengtheningnonprofits.org/resources/guidebooks/Community_Assessment.pdf

Basic Guide to Nonprofit Program Design and Marketing
Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD, Authenticity Consulting, LLC
http://www.eslarp.uiuc.edu/courses/FAA391_Spring09/Program%20design%20manual.pdf