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University of Tennessee Family and Consumer Sciences Guide to Needs Assessment 2025

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Introduction

Needs assessment is a process to identify what people need where they live, work or play. The purpose is to use the information gained to make plans to meet those needs. What are the needs of the people you serve? To answer this question, first and foremost, listen to people. Observe the needs in their lives. Examine census data. Examine other data sources such as the local newspaper or data provided by the Chamber of Commerce.

For University of Tennessee Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), conducting a needs assessment is a requirement for county agents. The required needs assessments are conducted in the fall, and information is expected to be used to help inform program planning for the upcoming year.

An effective community needs assessment identifies both the needs and the assets of the community. Needs assessments can be conducted at different levels: county-level, community-level or a focus on a specific audience. All of this information can help guide program planning.

We have prepared this publication to offer practical tools and techniques for understanding, conducting and communicating needs assessments to improve FCS programs and outcomes. We hope that this information is useful to you to help people, address issues that affect them, improve programs, and ultimately, offer real life solutions for Tennessee.

Why Are Needs Assessments Important?

Needs assessments are designed to evaluate gaps between current situations and desired outcomes, along with possible solutions to address the gaps. Needs assessments help Extension professionals identify and prioritize initiatives that will do the most good with limited resources. Needs assessments clarify the work of Extension agents and promote effective program planning by engaging advisory leaders, elected officials, volunteers and other stakeholders to explore important community issues. By identifying the most pressing needs, the needs assessment process informs program planning, ensuring that initiatives meet the needs that can be addressed by Extension programming through evidence-based strategies while maintaining trust and credibility within the community. Needs change over time, and a periodic assessment is necessary to understand these changes that impact people’s daily lives.

Extension agents are expected to conduct an annual needs assessment as part of their program planning process, but there are other times when conducting a needs assessment can be helpful:

- Your project or program is brand new.
- You are brand new to the community or your job.
- You want to learn more about the specific community needs related to a certain condition or emerging trend.
- You are applying for a grant or other funding proposal that requires a needs assessment (Angima et al., 2014).
- You need additional information and perspectives to communicate with donors, advisory groups, elected officials and other stakeholders (Berkowitz & Nagy, 2014).

How Should a Needs Assessment Be Organized?

Selecting Your Methods

All needs assessments should include a data/document review. This is a requirement for your annual review. Additional methods need to be included to ensure input from diverse stakeholders. Choose methods that will provide helpful feedback from different audiences. Think about how you can include perspectives from people who might not be a traditional Extension audience but could benefit from FCS programs.

Methods to choose from include:

1. Data/Document Review (required)
2. Advisory Group Meeting
3. Focus Group Meeting
4. Key Informant Interview
5. Observation
6. Stakeholder Meeting
7. Survey

Data Collection

Once you have selected your methods, make a plan of how you will collect your data. Questions to help guide this process include:

1. What audiences do you want to make sure to include?
2. What potential barriers may arise in accessing an audience or collecting data?
3. What data already exists?
4. When will you start collecting data?
5. When will advisory or other stakeholder meetings be held?

Worksheet: Organizing a Needs Assessment

Planning the Needs Assessment

- What existing information do you have (data/document review)
- What information still needs to be collected?
- What audiences/groups need to be included or focused on?
- What methods will you use?

Collecting Information

- Select the method and organize how you will collect the information.

Interpreting Findings

- What did you learn?
- How can you engage the community in setting priorities?

Utilizing Findings

- Summarize information for annual plan.
- Share findings with others.
- Consider conference presentations.

Needs Assessment Methods

Data/Document Review

Reviewing existing data should be a part of any needs assessment that you conduct. Document review is the foundation for your needs assessment. This data is important for several reasons:

1. Reliable data sources provide detailed information from a large sample size that would be difficult and unrealistic to collect on your own.
2. Sensitive topics such as homelessness, bankruptcy and food insecurity are difficult for people to discuss. Data sets and research studies can be good sources of these topics that would be difficult to collect.
3. Documents and data sets often reflect data that is collected in a real workplace or home as opposed to a special community meeting where participants may have biases based on being in a group setting.
4. These data sources can provide information over several years or decades allowing you the opportunity to identify trends.

Questions to ask when thinking about sources to look at for data:

1. What information do I need?
2. What topics do I need information about?
3. Will I be able to access county level data?
4. How current does the data need to be? What's my cut-off date?

When looking for data sources, it is important to use reliable sources of data. Reliable online sources are listed in the table on page 9. Other helpful sources of information include local and regional media reports about current issues. For example, if there have been several house fires in your community, fire safety education could be a helpful and timely program. Other examples include articles about trends in bankruptcy, crime and unemployment.

Libraries and chambers of commerce often are great sources of regional and county level data. In addition, other community agencies and institutions often conduct needs assessments on a regular basis. These can include health departments, hospitals, Head Start and other nonprofit agencies. Check with your contacts to see about obtaining copies of this information to include in your needs assessment when relevant.

Existing data from reliable sources provides information and numbers about a topic such as health information, education, etc. Hard statistics from the U.S. Census or from a survey give you actual numbers that you can include in your needs assessment such as the number of people in your county who receive SNAP benefits. It can be helpful to look at trends in these numbers. Has the number of people receiving SNAP benefits decreased, increased or stayed the same in the past five years? Even though these numbers are straight forward it helps to look at trends. Identifying these trends can be an important way to strategically meet the needs of your county.

Tips for Working with Data Sets:

1. Have a point of reference that is comparable to your county – It is good to compare your county to the state, but it is even more helpful to compare your county to similar counties as a way of gauging how well your county is doing.
2. Rates may be less reliable for smaller populations – Rates are often based on the occurrence of an event out of 100,000 people. Because many counties in Tennessee have fewer than 100,000 people, rates might appear or sound very high in rural counties compared to urban counties. This is especially true for events that happen infrequently like infant mortality, suicides, etc. In these instances, it is better to look at the actual number (rather than the rate) and look at how the actual number may or may not vary over time.
3. Different data sets sometimes provide different estimates – Look at similar data sets over time. This is especially true for estimates related to obesity, diabetes and heart disease. CDC provides the most accurate estimates of these diseases.
4. Data is only part of the overall picture – Numbers only provide part of the story, so it is important to include information collected through other methods like interviews and focus groups.

The table below shows suggested data sources and examples of information that is provided. All of these sources include county-level data.

Suggested Data Sources for Conducting Document Reviews

United States Census Bureau census.gov	• Population • Economic • Education • Employment • Families and living arrangements • Health • Housing • Income and poverty
Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count aecf.org	• Demographic information • Economic well-being • Education • Family and community • Health • Safety and risk behaviors
TN Department of Health tn.gov/health.html	• Health topics • Vital statistics • Health Surveillance reports
TN Department of Education tn.gov/education.html	• Standardized testing results • Graduation rates • School report cards
TN Department of Economic and Community Development tnecd.com/county-profiles/	• Demographics • Quality of life • Education • Unemployment • Top employers
County Health Rankings countyhealthrankings.org/	• Health outcomes • Quality of life • Obesity • Risk behaviors • Food environment
Feeding America feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity	• Food insecurity • Food deserts • Food bank locator
Health Resources & Services Administration hrsa.gov/	• Rural health • Health center • Maternal and child health

	• Telehealth and broadband • Grants and funding
America's Health Rankings americashealthrankings.org/	• Women and children • Maternal and infant • Senior • Mental and behavioral health • Health disparities • COVID-19

The document review is a helpful starting point for a needs assessment. It can help you to identify what is known and pinpoint what you still want to know. Document reviews tend to be especially helpful when used with other methods like interviews and focus groups. This provides a sense of both what is happening and why it may be happening.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants are often very helpful to add information to a needs assessment about why something is happening or understand the history behind community attributes. Identify people and professionals who would be knowledgeable about the area that you need more information about. For example, if you are seeking additional information about health needs in your county, interviewing health professionals such as nursing home and hospital administrators, school health coordinators, health department directors and primary care physicians could provide current insights about county health needs.

Tips for Conducting a Successful Interview

Prepare your questions in advance and practice them so that you are well-prepared. When conducting an interview, you should be dressed in either business attire or dressed in similar attire as the interviewee. If you do not understand an answer, be honest, and ask the interviewee to clarify for you. You should always start interviews by making small talk to make the person feel comfortable (Vilela, 2014).

Online platforms like Zoom also are a great option for conducting an interview.

Interview Protocol

When conducting the interview, ask a few questions and resist the temptation to offer advice (Creswell, 1998). An interview procedure is recommended. A written procedure helps you stay on task and on time. Here is an example interview procedure for an in-person interview:

1. Travel to interview site.
2. Engage in some small talk to put the interviewee at ease.
3. Inform the interviewee of the purpose of the interview.
4. Assure the interviewee that the interview is confidential.
5. Record the following information in your notes:
   - Date
   - Time
   - Location
   - Participant name
   - Interviewer's name
6. Conduct the interview (using the protocol).
7. Watch the time and do not go over time.
8. Thank the interviewee for participating.
9. Immediately return to the office to go through your notes and reflect.

Timing and Length

Timing is important for all interviews and should be considered before contacting potential interviewees. Is there a certain day of the week or time of day that the person is likely available? If you are interviewing fast-food managers about food safety training needs of their employees, the lunch hour is the worst possible time to call on them for an interview. The afternoon, say 2 p.m., might be much better.

When you contact the interviewee to invite them to participate in an interview, it is important that you know approximately how long the interview will last. If possible, the length of the interview should not be more than 30 minutes. By practicing your questions in advance and thinking through possible answers, you gain a sense of how long the interview will take. Interview friends, family, or co-workers to help determine an approximate length for the interview and to identify any questions that are not well-understood.

If the interview was scheduled for 30 minutes, the interviewee may not be able to talk longer, and you will need to end the interview. That is one reason you should ask the most important questions first or early in the interview so that you are likely to obtain answers.

Questions

This section will provide suggestions for developing interview questions.
Suggestions for asking about behaviors:

- More accurate information is obtained when you ask about a specific time period rather than asking people what they “usually” do.
- The time period you select should correspond to the topic. The last 12 months would apply to home ownership or pregnancy while the last 24 hours would apply to eating dairy products (Bradburn, Sudman & Wansink, 2004).

To write high-quality questions, start with some of these prompts:

- Describe for me…
- Tell me about a time when…
- Can you give me an example of…
- Tell me about a situation that… (Gupta, 1999)

Example Interview Protocol

The following interview protocol is targeted to a small business owner. These questions focus on challenges of the small business owner, views on the community and views on change. Notice a leadoff question reflects each of the major domains in the interview. Follow-up questions are listed, but these would only be used if the interviewee did not elaborate or did not mention them from their answer to the leadoff question.

Topic Domain 1: Challenges

Leadoff Question	• When you consider your experience as a small business owner, what are some of your challenges?
Possible Follow-up Questions	• Is employee supervision a challenge for you? • Do you have any challenges related to budgeting and/or bookkeeping?

Topic Domain 2: Views on Culture

Leadoff Question	• How has the community influenced your business?
Possible Follow-up	• What kinds of things do your customers say about the community in your store? • Do you consider that the community has a “shop local” culture?

Topic Domain 3: Views on Change

Leadoff Question	• What changes are you considering for your business?
Possible Follow-up	• What factors would speed or slow change in your business?

As with other needs assessment methods, it is not recommended to solely use key informants for an entire needs assessment. This would tend to place too much importance on the opinions of a few individuals, even though key informants tend to be knowledgeable and may provide distinct information.

Worksheet: Preparing Questions for Interviews

Tip: Make your leadoff question general in nature. This should be the most important question. Follow-up questions are used to gather additional information or to gather specifics.

Topic Domain 1:

Leadoff Question	
Possible Follow-up	

Topic Domain 2:

Leadoff Question	
Possible Follow-up	

Topic Domain 3:

Leadoff Question	
Possible Follow-up	

Advisory Committees

One of the most effective ways to assess needs and plan programs to meet those needs is to work with an advisory group (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2003; Barnett, Johnson & Verma, 1999). Advisory groups need to represent the diversity of your county including members from different geographic, political, racial, ethnic and socio-economic groups. The importance of involving non-traditional or underserved clientele cannot be underestimated. People will share their needs and goals if we ask. Also, advisory groups usually have representation from community coalitions, government agencies, schools, etc. Members do not serve forever; there must be a term of service and a rotation plan. This will contribute to a group that reflects the diversity of the audiences served and it will contribute to new ideas and energy.

Essential actions for involving advisory committees in the needs assessment include:

1. Identify members to reflect diversity.
2. Establish the term of service (like three years) and rotation of members.
3. Invite members to serve on the committee either face-to-face or by telephone.
4. Remind members about the first meeting by a letter or personal email.
5. Create an atmosphere where members feel free to discuss their community and concerns and where everyone's input is valued.
6. Inform members about program accomplishments.

(Cummings & Franck, 2014; Donaldson, 2008; University of Wisconsin Extension, 2003)

Advisory groups include your county Health Coalition and your TNCEP Coalition. If you have EFNEP in your county, you will also have an EFNEP Advisory Council. These groups can be very helpful for feedback on health and nutrition programs so try to include their feedback when possible.

A good way to involve the group in the needs assessment is to share data and information that you have already collected as a way to start the conversation but focus on listening to their ideas and concerns.

Stakeholder Groups

It is not always necessary to invite an entire county or town population to participate in a needs assessment. If you are focusing on ways to improve the visual appeal of neighborhoods, you might consider assessing and starting your program with just one neighborhood. You would naturally want to involve people from the neighborhood. In fact, involving too many people from outside the neighborhood too early in the process might create distrust and a lack of engagement on the part of residents. As the people who own property and live in the neighborhood, the residents are the key stakeholders.

Extension mailing lists are a great place to start to involve existing stakeholders. If you are assessing the needs of older adults, stakeholders could include the senior center staff, FCE members and older adults. It is a good idea to ask stakeholders to name others who might be contacted to answer questions. That allows you to check your mailing list for accuracy and potentially involve new clients.

Zoom and other online tools are simple, cost-effective methods to connect with participants for focus groups or interviews, especially for grandparents who may have mobility issues or live in rural areas. By focusing on a targeted group and gradually expanding outreach, you can ensure the assessment is both accurate and impactful, ultimately leading to better program development for these families.

Focus Groups

The following discussion on focus groups is adapted from:

Donaldson, J.L., Hastings, S. & Bower, L.K. (2013). Advancing Tennessee: Focus Group Interviews Facilitation Guide for FCS Programs.

Focus Groups Overview

Focus groups are planned discussions that help capture perceptions from a select group of people, and focus groups have multiple uses including needs assessment, program development (Krueger & Casey, 2009), evaluation and marketing (Martens, 2010). Focus groups are useful when you want to understand experiences, viewpoints and/or impressions. Focus groups can provide depth and breadth of information while helping to build relationships with clients (Martens, 2010).

Why Focus Groups?

Focus groups have many characteristics that make them well-suited for Extension work. First, focus groups tend to lend themselves to open-ended questions. This is helpful for thinking about complex problems and programs. Focus groups are useful when visual aids are needed for an effective interview. Focus groups can be helpful when the questions being asked are sensitive. The information gained from focus groups can help to address problems at the program design stage. Focus groups are useful when…

- You need a group to develop ideas
- Interaction and “building on ideas” will provide useful information
- One person shares and it triggers a memory for someone else
- Time to collect information is limited
- People get along

Participant Selection

- The ideal size of a focus group is seven to 10 people (Kreuger, 1988; Smithson, 2008); Krueger & Casey, 2009).
- Consider those who would be comfortable with one another, but do not necessarily know one another.
- Consider diversity in gender, race/ethnicity, residence and other areas to offer rich perspectives.
- Plan two to three focus group sessions with different people. This provides you with a greater cross-section of your clients and allows you to see patterns across the groups.
- Consider selecting participants who have a similar association to the topic being discussed. As an illustration, if you are assessing infant and child nutrition, one group might be parents. Another group might be all elected officials.

Quality Questions

Many focus groups use fewer than 10 questions. Ordering questions from general to specific works well. An icebreaker question related to the topic but something easy and nonthreatening to answer is a good way to start. Other suggestions for quality questions include:

- Use open-ended questions, “Where does your child do homework?” rather than “Does your child do homework in your car on the way to school?”

- “What do you like best about…?” and “Think back…” questions usually work well.

- Avoid “Why” questions. Instead of “Why did you attend the Health Fair?” ask “What prompted you to attend the Health Fair?”

Semi-structured interview question/guides will typically have a set of questions and a desired order, with some potential follow-up questions and other notes as to how the interviewer might adjust things if need be.

Process for Constructing a Guide (Tolley, 2016)

1. Define Your Objectives:
   Clearly identify the purpose of the focus group. What specific information are you seeking to gather?

2. Compose Your Questions and Develop Specific Questions:
   Transform your objectives into a concise list of broad, open-ended questions designed to uncover key insights. Each topic domain may have three kinds of questions: main question, follow- up and probes.
   - Main question: introduces topic
   - Follow-up: gathers more specific information and take the discussion to a deeper level
   - Probes: provide depth, clarification and/or detail
   - Examples:
     - Community Wellness Program:
       How do people in this community, center, etc., perceive a Tai Chi class targeted at individuals with chronic conditions? What factors would motivate participation and ensure buy-in?
       - Probe: What could this indicate?
     - Kinship Support Program:
       What are the barriers and motivators for grandparents or relatives raising kin in this community, school, etc., to engage in a support program? How can the program be tailored to address their unique needs?
       - Probe: In what way?
3. Decide on a sequence
   - Topics should be arranged in a logical sequence that fosters natural discussion.

Example: Guide for Assessing Barriers and Opportunities for TNCEP Nutrition Programs in Underserved Communities

Defining the Problem

1. What are the barriers that prevent individuals in underserved communities from accessing or participating in nutrition programs?

   Follow-up questions:

   - What barriers related to policies or community perceptions do you see affecting program participation?
   - Probes: Are there challenges related to transportation, scheduling, or program awareness?
   - How do cultural or social norms influence participation in nutrition programs?
   - What changes over time have impacted these barriers?

2. How would you describe the community's culture regarding nutrition, food security, and overall health?

   Follow-up question:

   - What additional resources or support do community leaders need to foster a culture of health and wellness?

   Probes:

   - Are there specific attitudes toward nutrition education?
   - How do community members view the importance of healthy eating?

3. How accessible are TNCEP nutrition programs and resources in underserved areas?

   Follow-up questions:
   - What changes or resources would make these programs more accessible?

   Probes:
   - What role do local partners or agencies play in supporting access?

- What are the barriers to implementing identified solutions?

4. Would incentives help increase participation in nutrition?

   Follow-up question:

   - What types of incentives (e.g., food vouchers, childcare, transportation support) would be most effective in engaging participants?

Collaboration

1. What types of collaborations currently exist in the community to support nutrition education and food security?

   Follow-up question:

   - How do these collaborations enhance awareness or participation in TNCEP programs?

   Probes:
   - Are partnerships with schools, food pantries or local businesses being leveraged?
   - What opportunities exist for expanding or strengthening these collaborations?

2. Who are the key stakeholders that should be engaged to support and expand TNCEP efforts?

   Follow-up question:
   - What does effective collaboration among these stakeholders look like?

Closing

1. If you could make one recommendation to increase participation and success in TNCEP nutrition programs, what would it be?
2. Are there any additional comments or insights you'd like to share?

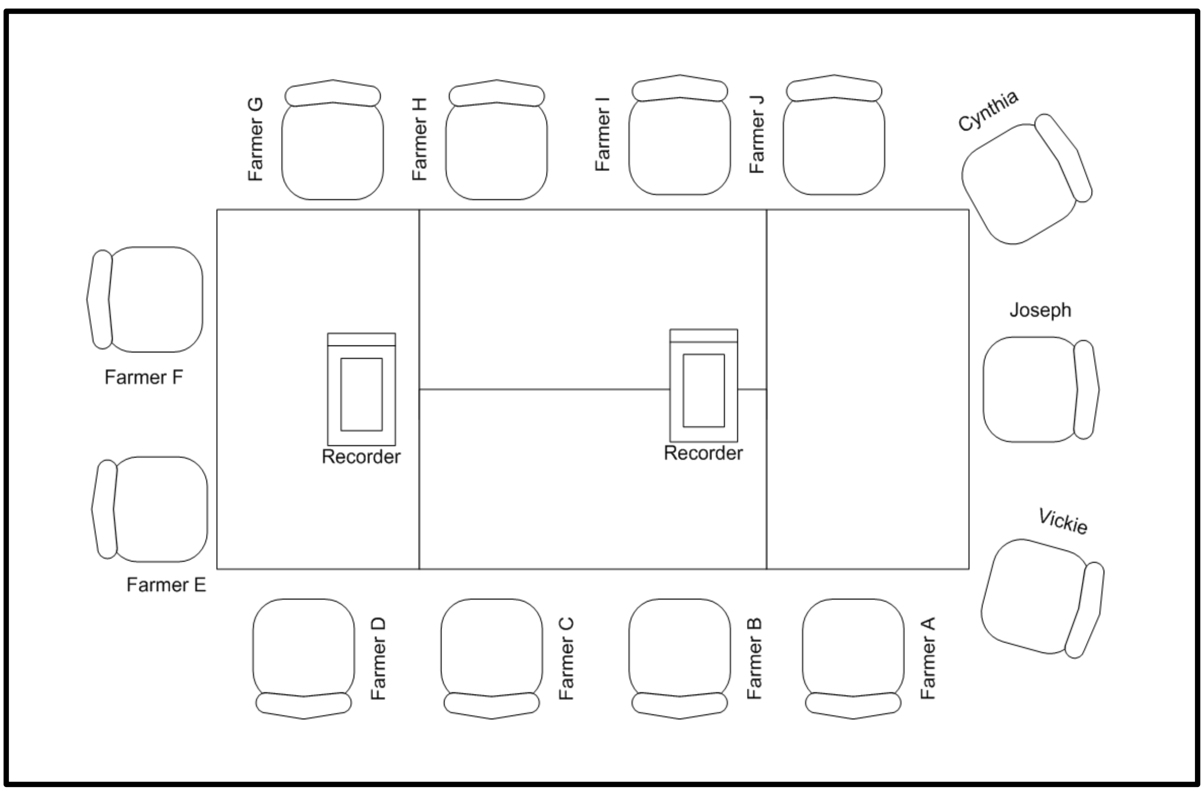
Focus Group Best Practices

- Invite people personally
- Secure comfortable location
- Provide pens/pencils/paper
- Provide refreshments
- Take a break after one hour
- Prepare in advance with one or more people serving as recorders
- Provide name tags/table tents

Room Set-Up

A recommended room set-up for a focus group interview is shown in Figure 1. This is an actual seating chart used for focus groups in Jackson County, Tennessee. Notice that the moderator is Joseph, and the recorders are Cynthia and Vickie. Notice that the focus group had 10 participating farmers. The room set-up includes four tables (each table being six feet long), 13 chairs, and two battery-powered recorders on the table.

Figure 1. Recommended Room Set-Up for a Focus Group Interview



Notetaker's Role: Documentation

Digital voice recorders are recommended. If using an audio recorder for an interview, always get permission first. Inform the interviewee in advance about the video or audio recording and clarify when recording starts and stops. Take detailed notes as backup—recorders can fail, and notes can capture nonverbal cues like smiles or confusion. In addition to notes on the verbal process, a good notetaker also enters observations that will enhance the transcript with nonverbal messages that have been conveyed during the discussion. For example, "Participant A shared a recent interaction with a member of the senior center, and the group was amused by the remark." Or "Participant B seemed defensive when asked about marketing techniques."

Moderator's role: Facilitating the discussion
Moderator skills: The moderator's key task is to foster a conversational partnership by creating a group of engaged participants, listening with nonjudgmental interest and ensuring the discussion flows smoothly. The first skill is the ability to "initiate and maintain a conversation with a stranger" (Frey & Oishi, 1995). The focus group moderator is critically important because the group discussion is reflective of his/her skills and values.

Characteristics of a good interviewer or moderator

- Ability to feel at ease and put others at ease
- Ability to build rapport and project unconditional respect and acceptance of others
- Ability to convey warmth and empathy
- Good verbal and interpersonal skills
- Good listening skills
- Ability to project enthusiasm and genuine interest in others
- Awareness of own nonverbal reactions, including body language

Conducting the Focus Group

Be mentally prepared
- Alert, friendly and free from distractions.
- Have the discipline of listening.
- Completely familiar with questions.

Make purposeful small talk
- Be warm and friendly.
- Set the tone for friendliness and sharing.
- Don't get involved in long conversations with any one person.

Provide an introduction
- Moderators must provide introductions that are well-rehearsed.
- Critical to make this short, smooth and snappy.

Encourage people to talk
- Smile.
- Look at them.
- Listen.
- Call on them by name, "Nancy, we have heard various ideas. What were your experiences?"
- If unfamiliar with participants, consider bringing write-in name tags for participants to wear.
- Never cross your arms.

Discourage any controlling talkers
- Look at other participants.
- Look down while they are talking.
- Cross your hands.
- Change your posture.
- Shuffle your note.s
- More direct techniques:"Let's take the next four minutes to silently write ideas for this question. [After four minutes] Now I would like each person to share one idea at a time."

Control your reactions

- Remain neutral; don’t evaluate or judge in any capacity.
- Keep your opinion to yourself.
- Never say “that’s good” or “excellent.”
- Nod your head to encourage dialogue but don’t show agreement with an idea.
- Think about what you are communicating verbally and nonverbally.

Keep listening

- Do not defend or justify.
- If a participant seems especially emotional (angry, euphoric, etc.) ask the person to describe how they feel.
- Validate by saying, “I understand why you would feel that way. Tell me more.”
- Validate by saying, “We’re trying to get as much information as possible, so I appreciate you. Would anyone else like to share?”

Offer appropriate questions

- Use pauses and probes.
- Ask your question and pause.
- Don’t talk to fill the silence—allow people to think about the question.
- After someone stops speaking and no one else responds, wait five seconds, then call on someone else to comment.
- Probes:
    - “Would you explain further?”
    - “Tell me more.”
    - “Would you provide an example?”
    - “I don’t understand. Tell me more.”
    - Repeat the question.
    - Repeat the reply.

Be flexible and consistent

- Moderators balance flexibility in questioning with consistency between and among different focus groups.
- If everyone has spoken, ask if there’s anything else, then move on to the next question.
- Participants should be having a conversation with each other; you are listening to that conversation.

Common errors in focus group moderating

- Allowing one or two participants to dominate the discussion

- Remining too long a topic
- Using the same words to repeat a question instead of rephrasing it
- Asking leading questions that might bias the answers such as:
  - Do you mean...?
  - You don't mean that...?
  - Don't you think that...?
  - Would you agree that...?

- Nonleading probes are usually open-ended such as:
  - How do you mean?
  - In what way?
  - What else?

Tips for Analyzing Focus Group Data

One disadvantage to focus groups is that the data can be challenging to analyze as compared to questionnaires (Martens, 2010). In general terms, you can analyze your data with these two tasks:

- Identify common responses within each focus group; these are referred to as common themes.
- Compare and contrast themes across the different focus groups.
- More information about analyzing focus group data is found in the Utilization section of this publication.

Surveys

Surveys can be a great way to get information from different people. Surveys can be written, verbal or online, but for surveys to be successful it is important that they have certain characteristics:

1. Make questions easily understood and easy to answer—word questions so that there is no wrong answer.
2. Keep it short—both the questions and the survey itself. For questions, try for fewer than 20 words. For surveys, 10 to 15 questions should suffice.
3. Limit ranking to four to five options. It is difficult to rank more than five options.
4. Make sure all questions relate to what you are interested in learning. When putting together a survey, look at each question and make sure that it needs to be included.
5. Make sure the survey goes to the right person—don't ask someone for information that they would not know.
6. Make sure that you can get an adequate number of people to complete the survey.

7. Be careful about bias—biased questions include “Do you agree that obesity is a serious issue in our county?” vs. Rate the seriousness of obesity in our county.
8. Place the most important question first, or at least a question closely tied to the title of the survey. Demographic questions should be last.
9. Keep the visual design simple. Blue seems to increase response rates. Have a clean layout. The top should have a logo and title. The bottom right should have navigation. Do not have any extra content (lines, logos, URLs). These can distract the respondent and reduce response rates. It is OK to use a background color but the answer spaces should be white.
10. Focus on what you are trying to accomplish and any benefits of the study. For example, it would be better to state instructions as: “From time to time we evaluate certain programs” instead of stating “I really need lots of respondents to have any hope of obtaining an ‘exemplary’ performance appraisal rating.”

Surveys of Targeted Audiences

Once Extension personnel have identified an audience that needs educational programming, one of the best places to start is to determine if there are existing mailing lists established in the county Extension office. Throughout Tennessee’s 95 county Extension offices, a wealth of mailing lists for specific audiences are maintained. Some of the sample lists available across the state include Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program volunteers, 4-H volunteers and many, many more.

A very important caveat is that sometimes existing clients have too much influence over a needs assessment, and the results produce neither new programming efforts nor new audiences served.

Paper Surveys

Paper surveys can be used with people who you have access to such as during a meeting or after a program. Just make sure to allow enough time to compile the surveys so that you can use the information. This is another reason for making the survey short.

For paper surveys, 12 pages printed front and back in booklet form is the recommended limit but only collect this much information if it is absolutely necessary to meet the needs for your assessment.

Online Surveys

Qualtrics can be an easy way to collect information from people who are willing to take an online survey. Qualtrics provides a report and gives you up-to-date information about how many people have completed the survey.

Some tips for a successful online survey:

1. Send out the link at a time when people are more willing to complete a survey—avoid sending out the survey at 8:00 a.m., on a Monday or a Friday, or at lunch time.
2. Send out at least one reminder—most people take surveys right after they receive them so send out reminders to increase response rates. Average respondents complete surveys in about four days (Shinn, Baker, & Briers, 2007). Follow-up by focusing on the person, such as "We realize this is a busy time of year, and we understand how valuable your time is. We are hoping you could give about five minutes to complete a short survey…"
3. Use multiple screens when laying out your survey. This will prevent respondents from doing excessive scrolling.

Increasing Response Rates

Survey response rates have been going down for both paper and online surveys for many years.

Tips to increase response rates for an online survey:

1. Send out the link at an optimal time if at all possible (Tuesday – Thursday between 10 and 11 a.m. or between 2 and 4 p.m.).
2. Send out at least one reminder to non-respondents about one week after the initial email. Personalize the reminders as much as possible.

Tips to increase response rates for mailed surveys:

1. Personalize the letter as much as possible.
2. Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
3. Send out follow-up letters to non-respondents about one week apart.

An initial contact letter is shown in Figure 2. See Figures 3, 4 and 5 for follow-up letters.

Figure 2. Example of an Initial Contact Letter

Dear FCE member,

From time to time we seek the opinions from a number of Tennesseans, including statewide Extension personnel, decision-makers, clientele and other stakeholders, to improve Extension programs. Today, we are asking you to help us assess our Family and Consumer Sciences programs. Our goal is to use the information to plan effective FCS programs in the future.

This will be a confidential survey. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your responses will be grouped with those of other citizens across the state. Your response is very important. Direct any questions about this survey to me at (add your name and contact information here)

Thank you for your participation. Please click the link below to take our survey:
(insert Qualtrics link)
Thank you!
Sign your name

Figure 3. Example of a One-Week Follow-Up Letter

Dear FCE member,

Last week we sent you an email asking you to complete a survey about effective Family and Consumer Sciences programs in the future. Thank you to everyone who has completed the survey so far!

If you have not completed the survey, we hope that you will do so as soon as possible. Because of the small number of people being asked to participate in this survey, it is important that each person completes the survey. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your responses are confidential and will be grouped with those of other citizens across the state. Please click this link to take our survey: (insert Qualtrics link)

Direct any questions about this survey to: (insert your name and contact information.)

Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sign your name

Figure 4. Example of a Three-Week Follow-Up Letter

Dear FCE member,

We realize that this is a busy time of year for you, and we know how valuable your time is. We are asking for 20 minutes of your time to share your opinions about Family and Consumer Sciences programs in the future.

We hope that you will complete the survey as soon as possible. Because of the small number of people being asked to participate in this survey, it is important that each person complete the survey. It will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Your responses are confidential and will be grouped with those of other citizens across the state. Please click this link to take our survey: (insert Qualtrics link) Direct any questions about this survey to: (include your name and contact information)

Your response is important because it will help us assess the program and make future plans that represent the perspectives of FCE members. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sign your name

Figure 5. Example of a Final Follow-Up Letter

Dear FCE member,

Several weeks ago, we sent you an email message asking you to complete short survey regarding your opinions about future Family and Consumer Sciences programs. As of today, we have not received your completed survey.

We have received many responses from across the state, and these opinions will be valuable to us in planning future FCS programs. We are contacting you today because your response helps us to get an accurate, representative picture of statewide opinions. This is the “last call” to receive responses to the survey.

We hope that you will complete the survey as soon as possible; it will take about 20 minutes. Your responses are confidential and will be grouped with those of other citizens across the state. Please click this link to take our survey: (insert Qualtrics survey link) Direct any questions about this survey to: (include your name and contact information)

Thank you for your help!

Sincerely,
Sign your name

Listening Sessions

Open listening sessions are similar to a focus group with the difference that these sessions can be small or large and sessions are usually open to everyone to attend. Open listening sessions can be a great way for multiple public agencies to collect information at one time and discuss the intricacies of complex issues. This approach may help you to build strong working relationships with other agencies and officials.

People can be invited to attend or invitations can be extended to the community through advertisements. People who are interested in attending are usually asked to bring a friend, a family member or someone they know who is interested in the topic.

In general, to start the meeting, you or a panel of experts share information about the topic of interest. Then attendees are invited to respond, to share their concerns and issues and to pose questions about the issue. Large groups can be separated into smaller groups to facilitate discussion. The key is to make sure that information is captured. It is important that you have someone who can help take notes about what is discussed. Review the notes to look for trends.

Setting Up a Listening Session:

1. Secure a location—think about the potential size of the group that might attend
    a. Consider the meeting room space, acoustics and the number of people who will attend. Microphones might be needed for the panel and the audience. Some locations will require more time and energy to prepare.
2. Send out invitations or advertise the listening session to the community.
3. Plan the structure—will you be presenting the information, will there be a panel of experts, will you need volunteers to help facilitate smaller discussions?
4. Make sure that everyone knows the agenda for the meeting. This is critical as people need to know that their comments are welcome at a scheduled time. Panel members need to be aware of their time limits for their comments to ensure time for audience comments.
5. Let all panelists know in advance who you are inviting to be on the panel. If the panelists do not know each other, make sure to make introductions and perhaps provide a short meet-and-greet session before the session starts.
6. Have water available for the panelists.
7. Conduct the listening session and collect information.

8. Compile the results looking for trends.
9. Communicate the results with the community.

Observations

Observations can be a good way to collect data about the environment and how people interact and behave. For example, windshield observations can be conducted to see where people are walking in a community, what parks people are utilizing, and where people are shopping.

- Showcasing product, plan, program, or policy
- Engage community
- Discover community issues
- Develop community capacity
- Develop action plan
- Communicate an issue

Observation is valuable when:

- Exploring how or what questions
- Studying underexplored topics
- Understanding settings in detail
- Observing natural behaviors vs. self-reports
- Evaluating interventions alongside other methods

Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation involves minimal interaction and may include unobtrusive methods like analyzing physical traces (e.g., worn carpets) or using recording devices. While detailed, it may lack contextual depth, which can be addressed by combining it with participant observation.

Using Audio/Video Recording

Audio or video recording is useful for analyzing communication and behavior in detail, especially when permitted in closed settings. Recordings allow transcription and repeated analysis.

Fieldnotes and Templates

Fieldnotes are a primary method for recording observations. Templates may guide inexperienced observers but should only be developed after initial open observation to avoid missing unanticipated behaviors or patterns.

Outcomes:

Information about a community collected by a participant observer can ensure that planning and decision making incorporates community needs and opinions and will therefore be more acceptable and more useful to the community.

Uses/strengths:

- Can develop greater understanding of sensitive situations.
- Can be used before developing a consultation program in cases where the nature of community issues is not known to agencies.
- Can be used for scoping information and determining key players when the issue is contentious or controversial.
- Can assist in the development of a more thoughtful consultation program that suits the subject community.

Special considerations/weaknesses:

- Best used alongside other methods (e.g., surveys, public meetings) to ensure comprehensive data.
- Relies on the researcher's ability to observe and interpret accurately.
- May raise concerns within the community.
- Time-intensive and unsuitable for isolated use due to potential bias.
- Effective for diverse, especially contentious or controversial issues.

(Cohen, 2006)

Interpreting Findings

Needs assessments should be a multi-tiered approach—one source of information is not going to provide a comprehensive understanding of an issue or your county. When looking at data from different sources, it is important to make sure that you have different types of information—both quantitative (hard numbers and percentages) and qualitative (open-ended comments, focus group and other group discussion). For each method, there is an appropriate way to interpret data.

Quantitative Data

For quantitative data, it is important to start with a description. If you conducted a survey, answer the following questions:

1. How many people received the survey?

2. Was this a specific group of people (for example, TNCEP coalition members, FCE members, teachers) or was the survey sent to a sample from the community?
3. How many people responded?
4. Describe the respondents by gender, race/ethnicity, age and location.

Now look at the actual findings. Calculate the findings for each question. This could be percentage or mean based upon the question. Look for similarities and differences. Think about your expectations. Do the findings agree with or contradict what you thought would happen? Do the findings agree with the information that you found during the document review?

Qualitative Data

For qualitative data, again start with a description. Answer the following questions:

1. How many people were invited to participate (specifically for focus group or advisory committee meetings)?
2. How many people actually attended?
3. How many people actively participated in the process? (This would be the number of people who actually spoke or contributed during the process if known. Sometimes there is a large group but only a few actually talk.)
4. If applicable, describe the respondents by gender, race/ethnicity, age and location.

Now look at the actual findings. Sort and compile data into response categories and subcategories. Look for trends and patterns in the data. Individual responses often provoke different ideas, but it is important to look for issues and ideas that are mentioned several times by different people.

Putting the Findings Together

Once you have looked at your findings separately by method, it is time to put your results together. This is the time to look for similarities and differences. What were the major findings from each method? Are these findings similar or were there differences?

It is possible that some of your findings contradict other findings. For example, a document review could identify bankruptcy as a major issue for your county. However, you conducted several focus groups and focus group members did not feel that bankruptcy was important. They did not see a need for programming for this issue. Your Advisory Committee also felt that overall resource management was more important, specifically relating to spending food dollars wisely. It is important to keep in mind that some issues are sensitive and might not emerge from focus groups or open listening sessions. People might react more positively to programs that deal with issues from a broader standpoint rather than a bankruptcy class.

Utilizing Findings

Because conducting needs assessments take time and resources, it is important to share these results with others in the community. Key stakeholders who have an interest in community issues should be informed through meetings and reports. Reports are helpful because they allow you to articulate the needs in the community and demonstrate how Extension programs can address those needs. Other methods of communication, such as newsletters and media reports, can help reach a broader audience. These methods not only promote Extension's involvement in the community but also inform the public about programs designed to meet local needs.

Tailor the report to the specific audience. For example, reports to stakeholders and consumers should be short and concise, incorporating charts and other graphics to summarize findings in an easily digestible format. Reports to funders may need to be more detailed, with additional data and supporting evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness and impact of the programs

Numbers and statements work together well. Numbers tell what is going on, but statements can illustrate those numbers. For example, perhaps you have the obesity rate from the CDC for your county, and it's 33 percent for adults. One of the responses from a TNCEP coalition member stated: "A major problem here is that there is not a grocery store. Even if people want to eat better it's hard to buy healthy foods." This statement better illustrates one of the reasons for the obesity issue in your community. Furthermore, it highlights a potential solution that is beyond Extension but could be addressed by community members and politicians who could use this to advocate for grocery stores.

Example of a One-Pager for Dissemination to Partners (available in Extension office):

Community Needs Assessment: Addressing Nutrition and Wellness for Older Adults in X County

Overview: In X County, many older adults face challenges in preparing meals that are both nutritious and suited to their needs, especially when cooking for just one or two people. Our needs assessment revealed that many seniors struggle with meal planning, portion control and making meals that are both healthy and easy to prepare in small quantities.

Key Findings:

- 50 percent of older adults report difficulties with cooking for themselves or one other person, often leading to food waste.
- 40 percent are unsure how to adjust traditional recipes for smaller portions while maintaining nutrition.
- 65 percent of respondents express interest in learning more about cooking for one or two people in a way that is both easy and nutritious.

Extension's Role: Cooking for one to two workshops: Offering hands-on classes focused on preparing balanced, single-serve meals and reducing food waste. Topics will include portion control, stretching resources, simple meal prep techniques, and healthy substitutions.

- Meal planning assistance: Helping participants create flexible weekly meal plans that cater to smaller households, focusing on nutrition, affordability and minimizing leftovers.
- Local resources: Partnering with local grocery stores and farmers markets to offer smaller portion sizes of fresh produce and ingredients, promoting healthy eating on a budget.
- Collaborate with senior centers to offer these workshops and resources directly to the target audience.
- Create and distribute educational materials on meal planning for smaller households.

How You Can Help:

- Encourage community participation in cooking workshops and meal planning events.
- Provide feedback on workshop content, program locations, and suggestions for further resources.

Contact Information: For more details or to get involved, please contact:

Your name, Family & Consumer Sciences Agent

Phone: [Your Phone Number]

Email: [Your Email Address]

Visit us at the X County Extension Office

Setting Priorities

Consider a “size and seriousness” test to set priorities for programming:

- Size: What is the percentage of the population affected by this issue…from 1 percent to 100 percent? Assign ranks to the issues based on the size of the population affected; 100 percent would be assigned a one and the next ascending percentage would be assigned two, etc.
- Seriousness: What is the urgency of this issue? To what degree will it affect the quality of life, environment and/or economy? Assign ranks to the issues based on the seriousness; one would be assigned to the most urgent issue, two would be assigned to the issue judged to be the next most urgent, etc.
- Finally, add the two ranks together. The issue with the lowest score is the priority issue.

Another strategy is the PEARL Test; PEARL is an acronym for propriety, economics, acceptability, resources and legality. Use this series of questions to systematically evaluate each issue and determine the priority issue:

- Propriety: Is a program for this issue suitable? Can the issue be solved through education (as education is the business of Extension)?
- Economics: Does it make economic sense to address this problem? Are there economic consequences if a program is not conducted?
- Acceptability: Will this program be accepted in the community? Can any barriers to acceptability be overcome?
- Resources: Do we have what we need to conduct the program?
- Legality: Do current laws allow program activities to be implemented?

Notes

Cautions and Caveats When Doing Needs Assessments

There are some common mistakes that people can make when doing needs assessments and it is important to be aware of these issues from the beginning.

1. Disregarding issues – This is usually not intentional, but it is easy to disregard issues that surface during needs assessments for several reasons. First, you might not feel that the issue is important. Second, the issue might be controversial. Third, it could be an issue that you are not familiar with.
2. Allowing undue influence – Certain people or groups can be very outspoken. It is important not to give these groups more influence about the needs assessment process. For example, it is important to talk with a broad audience and not just focus on a few key stakeholders. By talking to several people throughout the community, this will give a more accurate reflection of what is going on in your county.
3. Focusing too narrowly or too broadly – A common problem is focusing the needs assessment on only one topic—often an area with which you have the most knowledge. However, it is important to look at other issues when doing the assessment—even issues that might not be addressed by Extension. This will give you a better understanding of factors that might unintentionally impact your programs and your county. It is also important not to look too broadly. For example, it is important to look at county-level statistics and not just statewide or national data. For counties with large populations, it is helpful to look at specific communities. County-wide data can sometimes “hide” issues that are affecting different communities.
4. Relying only on one data source – A needs assessment has to consist of several methods. Only looking at census data does not give more detailed information about what is going on in a community. All of these methods have limited value if they are done in isolation. A good needs assessment starts with a plan including the different methods that will be used.

Additional Resources

- As university employees, we are entitled to 50 free hours of statistical consulting every year. This service is offered through the Office of Information Technology and can be accessed by emailing a help ticket to OIT. They provide help with a wide range of statistical needs.
- For more in-depth discussion on these topics, please refer to the Needs Assessment Guidebook for Extension Professionals, Extension publication PB 1839.

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Appendix A – Focus Group Invitations

Invitation for FCS Needs Assessment

Dear [name],

The University of Tennessee Extension in [County Name] is working to improve programs and select new programs for the next five years. Our planning process will include a review of existing social indicators (like Census data), focus group interviews, and input from our Extension Advisory Councils. The purpose of this letter is to ask for your direct involvement in our planning process by participating in a focus group.

Details of the meeting are as follows:

Date:
Start Time:
End Time:
Location:

This meeting will allow you to share your opinions about UT Extension programs and your community needs. The focus group session should take no more than two hours. Your comments and feedback will remain confidential. Please visit the following website prior to the focus group to familiarize yourself with the various UT Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs:

fcs.tennessee.edu/

I look forward to seeing you on [date]. If you have any questions, please contact me at [phone] or [email].

Sincerely,

Name
Extension Agent

Appendix – Focus Group Protocols

Interview Protocol for FCS Needs Assessment
Joseph L. Donaldson and Linda K. Bower

Focus groups provide more valuable information when participants interact with a product or service rather than just give their perceptions (Eskenazi, 2011). For this reason, we asked all focus group participants to visit the State Extension FCS website (fcs.tennessee.edu) prior to the focus group so that participants could share specific examples and interactions with program information, rather than just react to program names or objectives.

Introduction
The leader summarizes the purpose of the group, confidentiality, length of the interview, the fact that there are no right answers and that it is ok to disagree. Either ask people to introduce themselves, or make sure everyone is introduced before the first question.

- Purpose of the Group: Hello everyone. Thanks so much for being here. My name is [your name] and my colleague is [recorder's name]. Our purpose is to conduct focus group discussions about the future of UT Extension to strengthen the organization's programs and service to Tennesseans.
- Confidentiality: Everything that you say is confidential.
- Length of the interview: We will conclude at approximately [end time] and we will take a break after the first hour.
- Ground Rules:
  - First, there are no right answers or wrong answers. We are interested in your opinions and perspectives on UT Extension.
  - Second, you shouldn't feel that you have to agree with everyone else in this room if that's not how you really feel. We expect people will have different views on our questions.
  - Third, we want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. We're not here to promote a particular way of thinking. We just want to understand your viewpoints.
  - Fourth, we ask that you talk one at a time.
- First Question: Our first question will be round-robin, we will ask everyone to respond. The first question is: How and when have you been involved with UT Extension?

Extension Programs

1. How and when have you been involved with UT Extension? [Round Robin]

Focusing on Needs

2. Prior to focus group – review knowledge area website[1].
3. How many of you were able to review?
    - Tell me what you saw
    - If UT Extension only has resources to do <u>one</u> of those programs, which one or two are most needed in our county?

Thinking Ahead

4. What must UT Extension family and consumer sciences do in the future to remain relevant to the needs of [county name]?
5. Is there something that UT Extension family and consumer sciences could do to improve our service to [county name]?
    - How can programs be more effective in the future?
6. What priorities in [knowledge area] do you feel Extension should address in the future?

Agencies/Organizations

7. What other agencies/organizations are addressing this issue?
8. Is there a need for UT Extension to conduct programs addressing this issue?

Audiences

9. Who has this need?
    - Do they recognize they have this need?
10. Who would be the most likely audience to participate?

Marketing

11. How can we best reach this audience?
12. How can fee-based programs be used, if at all, to conduct these programs?
13. How can we motivate this audience to participate?

Closing

14. Is there anything we have not talked about that you believe is important for the future of UT Extension family and consumer sciences?
15. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important?

Summary

- Recap the big ideas as time allows (call on the recorder)
- Show video of statewide FCS programs as time allows
- Thank the participants
- Other ideas? Feel free to contact the Extension FCS agent

[1] The knowledge areas are: family economics; health and safety; human development; and nutrition and food safety. See fcs.tennessee.edu

Appendix C – Advisory Committee Invitations

Advisory Committee - Sample Letter

Date

Name
Address
Town, TN ZIP

Dear Name,

It was a pleasure to speak with you today. Thank you for agreeing to serve as a member of the ____________________County TNCEP Coalition. This group:

- reviews the current TNCEP program in our county,
- identifies under-served audiences,
- makes suggestions for improvements, and
- offers advice for how Extension can serve the nutrition education needs of low-income adults and youth.

The TNCEP Coalition is made up of about X community members and professionals who are interested in nutrition education. The group meets [insert number of times the coalition meets]. The next meeting will be held on ______________________ in the ______________________. We will meet from ____ to ______ pm. We hope that you can accept this opportunity to determine the direction of nutrition education in our county.

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at ____________________. I look forward to working with you! Thank you!

Sincerely,

Name
Extension Agent

Appendix D – Needs Assessment Template for Partners & Community Members

UT EXTENSION FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

PARTNER NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Thank you for participating in our needs assessment survey. Your input is essential in helping us understand and address the needs of our community.

How familiar are you with UT Extension? (Rate on a scale from 1 to 5 with 5 being very familiar.)				
1 – Not at all familiar	2	3	4	5 – Very familiar

What are the most pressing issues facing your community? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Access to healthy food
- ☐ Affordable housing
- ☐ Aging issues and needs
- ☐ Chronic disease (diabetes, cancer and heart disease)
- ☐ Disability needs
- ☐ Environmental conservation
- ☐ Financial literacy, debt management, capacity building, and planning
- ☐ Food, nutrition & safety issues
- ☐ Health and wellness education
- ☐ Internet knowledge and security skills
- ☐ Job training and employment opportunities
- ☐ Mental health
- ☐ Obesity
- ☐ Resume and interviewing skills
- ☐ Youth development and education
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

Please circle how important these programs or services are for your participants at your organization.

Programs	1 Not very important	2	3	4	5 Very important
Chronic Disease education (diabetes, cancer, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Clothing – Sewing education	1	2	3	4	5
End of Life Planning education	1	2	3	4	5
Food Preservation education (canning, drying)	1	2	3	4	5
Housing Issues (purchasing, maintaining)	1	2	3	4	5
Mental Health Issues	1	2	3	4	5
Money Management (savings, credit, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Nutrition education (healthy cooking)	1	2	3	4	5
Parent education	1	2	3	4	5
Physical Activity programs	1	2	3	4	5
Pregnancy (prenatal) education	1	2	3	4	5
Retirement Planning	1	2	3	4	5
Stress and Anger Management education	1	2	3	4	5
Substance Misuse education	1	2	3	4	5
Technology education (online programs, security)	1	2	3	4	5

Which **UT Extension FCS programs** have been at your organization in the past year? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Human Development- ACEs, Girl Talk, Love Languages, Mindfulness
- ☐ Community Health- Matter of Balance, Chronic Conditions, Chair Yoga
- ☐ Nutrition and Food Safety- ex. Canning Workshops, Fresh Plate, Dining with Diabetes
- ☐ Consumer Economics- ex. homebuyer education. PACE, Skill Up, On My Own
- ☐ EFNEP or TNCEP- Eat Well Feel Well, Eating Smart and Moving More, Farmer's Market Fresh
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

When learning methods work best for participants at your organization? Please rank your preferences from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most preferred method.

____ Face-to-face meetings

____ Zoom/webinar meetings

____ Self-paced online courses

____ Sessions over social media

____ Video tutorials

What barriers make it challenging for your participants to participate in Extension programs? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Cost of participation
- ☐ Not offered when I can attend
- ☐ Lack of awareness about programs
- ☐ Lack of child care
- ☐ Programs do not meet my needs
- ☐ Transportation issues
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

How can UT Extension FCS programs be improved? (Please provide specific

What is the best way for us to communicate upcoming programs and events? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Community bulletin boards
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Extension website
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Local newspaper
- ☐ Mail
- ☐ Phone call
- ☐ Text message
- ☐ Other (please specify) ___________________

What type of organization do you represent?

- ☐ School system
- ☐ Non-profit organization
- ☐ County government
- ☐ Head Start
- ☐ Health Department
- ☐ Private business
- ☐ Volunteer
- ☐ Other: _______________

What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ African American or Black
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _______________________________

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: __________________

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your needs or about how UT Extension can better serve you?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP.

UT EXTENSION FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

COMMUNITY MEMBER NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

Thank you for participating in our needs assessment survey. Your input is essential in helping us understand and address the needs of our community.

What are the most pressing issues facing your community? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Access to healthy food
- ☐ Affordable housing
- ☐ Aging issues and needs
- ☐ Chronic disease (diabetes, cancer and heart disease)
- ☐ Disability needs
- ☐ Environmental conservation
- ☐ Financial literacy, debt management, capacity building, and planning
- ☐ Food, nutrition & safety issues
- ☐ Health and wellness education
- ☐ Internet knowledge and security skills
- ☐ Job training and employment opportunities
- ☐ Mental health
- ☐ Obesity
- ☐ Resume and interviewing skills
- ☐ Youth development and education
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

Please circle how important these programs or services are for your community.

Programs	1 Not very important	2	3	4	5 Very important
Chronic Disease education (diabetes, cancer, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Clothing – Sewing education	1	2	3	4	5
End of Life Planning education	1	2	3	4	5
Food Preservation education (canning, drying)	1	2	3	4	5
Housing Issues education (homebuyer)	1	2	3	4	5
Mental Health education	1	2	3	4	5
Money education (savings, credit, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Nutrition education (healthy cooking)	1	2	3	4	5
Parent education	1	2	3	4	5
Physical Activity programs	1	2	3	4	5
Pregnancy (prenatal) education	1	2	3	4	5
Retirement Planning	1	2	3	4	5
Stress and Anger Management education	1	2	3	4	5
Substance Misuse education	1	2	3	4	5
Technology education (online programs, security)	1	2	3	4	5

What types of **UT Extension programs** have you participated in this year? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Agriculture
- ☐ Horticulture
- ☐ Family and Consumer Sciences
- ☐ 4-H Youth Development
- ☐ Community Development
- ☐ Health and Nutrition
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

Which **UT Extension FCS programs** have you participated in this year? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Human Development- ACEs, Girl Talk, Love Languages, Mindfulness
- ☐ Community Health- Matter of Balance, Chronic Conditions, Chair Yoga
- ☐ Nutrition and Food Safety- ex. Canning Workshops, Fresh Plate, Dining with Diabetes
- ☐ Consumer Economics- ex. homebuyer education. PACE, Skill Up, On My Own
- ☐ EFNEP or TNCEP- Eat Well Feel Well, Eating Smart and Moving More, Farmer's Market Fresh
- ☐ Other (please specify)____

How frequently do you participate in UT Extension programs?

- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ A few times a year
- ☐ Annually
- ☐ This is my first time participating

When you need multiple in-depth education sessions or sources, what learning method would you prefer? Please rank your preferences from 1 to 5 with 1 being the most preferred method.

____ Face-to-face meetings

____ Zoom/webinar meetings

____ Self-paced online courses

____ Sessions over social media

____ Video tutorials

What makes it hard for you to participate in Extension programs? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ Cost of participation
- ☐ Not offered when I can attend
- ☐ Lack of awareness about programs
- ☐ Lack of child care
- ☐ Programs do not meet my needs
- ☐ Transportation issues
- ☐ Other (please specify)________________________________

How can UT Extension FCS programs be improved? (Please provide specific suggestions)

What is the best way for us to communicate upcoming programs and events? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Community bulletin boards
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Extension website
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Local newspaper
- ☐ Mail
- ☐ Phone call
- ☐ Text message
- ☐ Other (please specify) ________________________________

Information about you

Our mission is to serve everyone who lives in Tennessee. This information helps us to make sure that we are listening to different perspectives.

How old are you?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-45
- ☐ 46-55
- ☐ 56-65
- ☐ 66 and above

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: ______________

What is your current occupation?

- ☐ Student
- ☐ Employed full-time
- ☐ Employed part-time
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Other (please specify): _______

What is your race/ethnicity? (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ African American or Black
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe:

____

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your needs or about how UT Extension can better serve you?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

Advisory Committee - Sample Letter

Date

Name
Address
Town, TN ZIP

Dear Name,

The next meeting of the ________________ County TNCEP Coalition will be _____________Date__________ at the Extension Office. We will begin at _______p.m. and should finish at ____________ p.m.

We appreciate your willingness to serve. The TNCEP Coalition helps Extension and community leaders to focus attention on problems that can be solved through education and involvement. Coalition members learn about educational programs and how they can help people access those programs. If for any reason you do not wish to serve on the TNCEP Coalition, please let us know.

We look forward to seeing you. Please let us know if you are unable to attend, and please feel free to use our voice mail system after hours. Our phone number is _______________. If you have a question or concern about Extension programs, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you!

Yours truly,

Name
Extension Agent

FCS Case Study Examples

Case Study: Conducting a Needs Assessment for Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program (TNCEP)

Background

The Tennessee Nutrition and Consumer Education Program (TNCEP) aims to improve the health and nutritional habits of limited-resource individuals and families in Tennessee. The program focuses on promoting healthier food choices, improving food security, and encouraging physical activity to reduce chronic diseases like obesity and diabetes.

To enhance the effectiveness of the program, a needs assessment is conducted in Shelby County, where health disparities and food insecurity are prominent. The assessment focuses on understanding the barriers residents face in accessing nutritious food, their knowledge of healthy eating, and the resources available in their community.

Phase 1: Planning the Needs Assessment

Objectives:

1. Identify key nutritional challenges and gaps in knowledge among residents in Shelby County.
2. Assess the availability and accessibility of healthy food options.
3. Gather input on preferred formats for TNCEP interventions (e.g., workshops, online resources).

Engage Stakeholders:

- Community leaders, local healthcare providers, school officials, low-income families and individuals, food banks and local grocers

Methods Chosen:

- Surveys (both paper and digital)
- Data analysis of existing public health and socioeconomic data

Phase 2: Data Collection

A 15-question survey was distributed to 50 households. The questions covered:

1. Frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption.
2. Access to grocery stores or farmers' markets.
3. Barriers to cooking at home (e.g., time, knowledge, or equipment).
4. Awareness of TNCEP programs.
5. Interest in specific topics (e.g., meal planning, budgeting for groceries).

Phase 3: Key Findings

1. Nutritional Challenges:
    - 62 percent of surveyed families consumed less than three servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
    - A significant portion of residents relied on convenience stores with limited healthy options.
2. Barriers Identified:
    - Transportation: 45 percent of respondents lacked access to reliable transportation to larger grocery stores.
    - Knowledge: 38 percent indicated limited knowledge of cooking healthy meals.
    - Financial Constraints: 70 percent reported difficulty affording fresh produce regularly.
3. Community Resources:
    - Two food pantries served the area but had inconsistent supplies of fresh produce.

Phase 4: Recommendations

1. Mobile Farmers' Market: Collaborate with local farmers to bring fresh produce to underserved areas weekly.
2. Hands-On Workshops: Offer cooking classes at community centers, focusing on simple, affordable, and nutritious meals.
3. Nutrition Education:
    - Implement programs for children, encouraging them to bring healthy habits home.
    - Develop printed educational materials tailored to low-literacy audiences.
    - Create a directory of local food assistance programs and distribute them widely.

Phase 5: Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

1. Conduct follow-up surveys to assess behavior changes three- and six months post-intervention.

Conclusion

The needs assessment revealed critical gaps and opportunities for TNCEP to tailor its programming to the unique needs of Shelby County. By addressing transportation, food access, and education barriers, TNCEP can make a significant impact on the health and well-being of the community.

Tips for Conducting a Needs Assessment for Rural Communities

Background

As a new agent tasked with conducting a needs assessment in a rural community, the challenge lies in understanding and addressing the unique needs of the area. This case study outlines the steps taken to effectively assess and address the needs of a predominantly rural county, as experienced by a new agent.

Steps Taken

1. Historical Insights
    - Consultation: Engage with colleagues and stakeholder groups, such as the agricultural committee, to identify existing partnerships.
    - Review: Examine previous years' plans for the county to understand established collaborations and gain insights into past initiatives.
2. Engage with County Groups
    - Integration: Join groups actively serving the county, including the County Health Council and Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition.
    - Networking: Attend meetings to foster relationships and assist with data collection and collaborative efforts.
3. Connect with Established Groups
    - Partnerships: Strengthen ties between the Extension Office and community groups and organizations like senior centers, Head Start programs, assisted living facilities, and public housing.
    - Outreach: Invite leaders from these groups to participate in advisory groups, focus groups, and/or complete surveys regarding community needs.

4. Maintain Effective Communication
    - Engagement: Regularly communicate with community partners to discuss their needs and ensure programming is beneficial and relevant.
    - Evaluation: Conduct annual check-ins with partners to evaluate the effectiveness of past programs and gather feedback for future initiatives.
    - Presentation: Present findings at advisory or stakeholder meetings, such as agricultural committee or FCE County Council meetings, to identify common needs across the community.
5. Document Key Findings
    - Consolidation: Compile results into a comprehensive report, incorporating data from surveys and existing public health and socioeconomic sources.
    - Analysis: Report findings from advisory groups and stakeholder meetings to determine community needs in areas such as nutrition, community health, human development, and consumer economics.
    - Prioritization: Identify and prioritize programs that address the needs highlighted by the assessment.

Results

The needs assessment provides a clear understanding of the community's requirements, leading to the development of targeted programs. By leveraging past experiences, engaging with key groups, and maintaining open lines of communication, the agent was able to create effective initiatives that met the community's needs.

Conclusion

Conducting a needs assessment is crucial for understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities. The steps outlined in this case study demonstrate how a systematic approach can lead to the development of programs that build stronger, more resilient rural areas. The agent's efforts contributed significantly to the well-being of the community, showcasing the importance of thorough and collaborative needs assessment processes.

Needs Assessment in an Urban East Tennessee Area

A rapidly growing urban area with a current population of 198,162 has seen a significant change in the needs of its people over the past five years. As a consequence of this growth, the city faces challenges related to housing, healthcare access, food security and transportation. As an Extension agent, it is vital to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to identify areas where UT Extension may bridge the gap in services.

Before planning can begin, the Extension agent speaks with members of their office, the agricultural committee and community partners to determine what questions should be asked. They also take a look at past needs assessments to see if there are questions that should be included, and response patterns.

The Extension agent decides to take a multi-method approach to their needs assessment:

- They begin by looking at secondary data from sources such as the United States Census, city and county planning reports, Kids Count and County Health Rankings.

- They begin by distributing surveys to community partners, libraries, community centers, senior centers, and other similar institutions throughout their city. This way multiple demographics may be reached.

- Stakeholders, partners and past clients were invited to an in person needs assessment meeting, where the questions were asked and discussed in an open forum. Responses were recorded by a member of the extension office so that they may be referenced later.

- Advisory boards, such as the Food Policy Council and Health Council, were also given the survey and invited to speak directly with the extension agent should they have additional input.

- Observations made while out in the field, as well as direct quotes from community members, were recorded as well.

The Extension agent compiled the results from all sources, identifying the top needs in their county. This information was then used to inform the agent's programming for the next year, addressing issues that will affect the residents' quality of life and create programs that are equitable across the city.

Creating and fostering partnerships are essential for any community program. However, in many communities, similar organizations often compete for the same funding sources, which can unintentionally turn collaborators into adversaries. Additionally, partners often feel stretched thin as they juggle roles on multiple local boards and committees. So how can you keep your partners motivated and engaged to ensure your programs are effective and address your community's specific needs?

- Communicate regularly
    - Stay connected with your partners, advisory committee members and coalition members through consistent updates
    - Use newsletters, phone calls or in-person/virtual check-ins to share progress, discuss challenges and gather feedback.
- Involve Partners in Decision-Making
    - Engage advisory committees, FCE members and coalition members in setting priorities.
    - Collaborate to create a shared vision and leverage their expertise and experience.
    - Brainstorm what success looks like and establish actionable goals to achieve shared objectives.
- Celebrate Successes
    - Highlight achievements with data, testimonials, and success stories to show how their work makes a meaningful difference.
    - Host events or small gatherings to celebrate milestones and acknowledge collective efforts.
- Recognize Contributions
    - Show appreciation through public recognition, small tokens of gratitude or even a simple thank-you note.
    - Personal gestures of recognition can go a long way in strengthening relationships.
- Offer Professional Development Opportunities
    - Provide workshops or learning exchanges where partners can share their expertise, such as grant writing or best practices, to help the network grow collectively.
    - Equip partners with new publications and skills that benefit both their organizations and the partnership.

- Maintain Transparency
  - Keep all partners informed about challenges, changes or program updates to eliminate surprises.
  - Be open and respectful to ensure trust and long-term collaboration.

By applying these strategies, you can foster strong, motivated partnerships that not only enhance your programs but also create a sense of community and shared purpose.

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PB1931 08/25 25-0450 Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and County governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.