This week's resources:
Class Home Page 201
OL 201 Assignment 1 Homework Instructions
Download Class Documents: Summary of Ten Seed Technique Word Doc.
Download Class Documents: Ten Seed Technique Workshop Lesson Plan
Download Class Documents: Ten Seed Technique How-To Card
Magee Example Project OL 201 Assignment 1

Assignment 1. What's the real problem?
Great project design will engage donors, increase funding, and ensure sustainable, positive project results. How do we do this?

The First Step
Factual, clear problem definition through research and stakeholder interviews.

Developing a Project Based upon Participatory Needs Assessments
The goal of the first assignment is to experiment with ways of determining community need based upon the vantage of the community members that you serve. Why is this important to do? As donors or non profits and as human beings we are all guilty of assuming that we know what is best. But what is best for us may not be what is best for another person faced with a different situation than ours. We need to understand and acknowledge their perception of their needs.

What is a community?
A community is the group of people that you serve. They used to be called beneficiaries, but that term is being replaced by terms like clients, community members – or constituents.

Examples of communities could be:
- urban agriculturalists
- teenagers visiting a teen drop-in center
- people visiting a food bank
- recent immigrants learning to navigate a new country and a new culture
- members of a town developing a trail system in an adjacent wilderness area
- members of a small town in Nebraska in the process of revitalizing it
- citizens trying to fund a community health center
- local farmers forming a marketing association
- young families in need of day care

What is a project?
A project is a group of activities that you have theorized will provide long-term, sustainable solutions to community identified need. Sometimes project activities are called interventions, but this has a very top down, almost invasive sound to it; we prefer to call them simply activities. Your organization might focus on one specialized type of activity – such as providing nutritious lunches for the homeless. Or your organization might combine clusters of activities into more complex projects.

Why Participatory Needs Assessments?
There are several very positive reasons for encouraging your community to participate in:
1. the process of defining their needs/problems
2. prioritizing their needs
3. choosing the solutions to be used in addressing their needs

Here are some examples why:
- Donor input can help guide you in ramping up funding.
- Community members may have a greater depth of knowledge about their problems than we do, and so will be better able to identify important and underlying causes for the challenges they face. You might discover that community members are facing challenges that you weren't aware of—but that are solvable.
- If community members are engaged in the process of needs identification, and feel their voice has been heard, then they will have a sense of ownership for the process and the outcomes; this leads to long-term project sustainability. Ownership can be thought of as the community's demand for the products and services that your organization will provide.
- Clearly defining community need can lead to better choices in choosing solution oriented activities—leading to greater project impact. A well designed project will also capture donor attention.

- Working with a community to address their needs will develop trust on their part in working with your organization on future projects or activities.

How to proceed
For the purposes of this course we are going to suggest a simplified starting point, and a simple project concept. Once you learn the system you will be able to expand into more complex needs assessments.

In the Download Class Documents link to your left you will see several documents under Assignment One about the Ten Seed Technique and ways of developing community participation and understanding real community need.

This technique is very straightforward. As you read through the Ten Seed document you will discover several techniques that are easy to implement.

First, we need to develop a relationship within the community.
Let's say you work at a food bank and want to begin providing food for elderly constituents. The first step is to meet with people and organizations that have contact with elderly community members and discuss your potential plans. With their support, you will be able to meet elderly community members interested in participating in your project.

Communities are diverse and we need to be sure that we are working with a representative example of its members. Each subgroup of community members will have their own set of needs; some members may even be self-serving. Plus, there are many stakeholders in the nonprofit process:
- the clients themselves
- volunteers
- your program staff
- financial donors
- donors of products
- civic human services organizations

Each stakeholder has their own mission. You can begin to see that with all of the different stakeholders involved, it can be difficult to assess and prioritize real community need. You will need to choose which groups and individuals will be the most representational of overall community need.

We also need to exercise some critical self evaluation
In an ideal setting, you would start your project design by developing relationships, and then engaging community members in the needs assessment process. However, even your own organization will complicate this process by coloring it with its own mission. For example:

1. Your organization has a specialty. Let's say that you focus on providing nutritious food to people in need. How do you balance your organization's specialization with needs defined by the community that aren't nutritional in nature?
Potential solutions: You could partner with another non profit on this first set of needs that doesn't fit your specialization. Or, you could decide to expand your organization's capabilities and receive training in a new specialty.

2. You already have a grant award which was designed to fund specific activities, and the activities don't exactly match the needs that the community defined.
Potential solutions:
A. You could partner with another nonprofit who does have funding for meeting the initial community needs.
B. You could see if your donor would let you 'pull' some of the community identified need into a component of your project – or exchange one set of activities for another.
C. You could seek additional grant funding for a second project that will address these needs.

3. What if the community comes up with a top-priority need that you don't think is important, or don't think it will do any good?
Potential Solution: You will need to weigh the costs and time investment of their priority against building goodwill and trust between your organization and the community.

4. What if you are already working in a community and have an established relationship and an ongoing project with them:
Potential solution: A community needs assessment at this point may be an excellent idea. It can give your organization qualitative feedback about your programming. Remember, this is all about long-term sustainability; if your community isn't buying into your current programming, it might not last very long after you leave. So a needs assessment will offer your organization two things: feedback for fine-tuning existing projects, and ideas for the next project and funding cycle.

Participatory Needs Assessments
Conducting a community needs assessment allows us to gauge need, its underlying causes—and also identify community assets which could be used in support of the project. In a participatory needs assessment your community members are participating with you in the assessment of their need. They are part of the process.

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—some simple, some complex.

So let's look at a very simple example.
Let's say that you work for an urban food bank. Community members that could participate in an assessment could be:
- the elderly visiting your food bank
- families trapped in poverty 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 could then simply design a project from the results of the assessment.

However, you could then also share the interview results with the stakeholder groups below when you approach them for their feedback and begin engaging them for their assistance.
- 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 about poverty, under-nutrition, and obesity

You may find interesting project ideas and opportunities in your assessment results. For example:
- the elderly find it difficult to get to your food bank and to stand in line
- a nutritionist suggests that you should try to stock a greater diversity of food for increased health
- farmers would be happy to make donations—but transportation is an issue
- volunteers could provide time and skills in solving these challenges—but need training

These 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 receiving help from volunteers.

How do you conduct a needs assessment?
Because of the diversity of each one of your organizations you may need to use slightly different assessment tools. First, read through the documents in "Download Class Documents" and read the information of the Ten Seed Technique. Or, see the list of resources just below on participatory needs assessments.

Planning for your assessment.
Depending on the complexity of your projects, the planning process can range from quick and simple to sophisticated to scientific. The links below provide a number of documents that span this range. You can look through them and decide which method will be best for you.

Getting started
The Assignment One Homework will guide you through a simplified needs assessment process.

Downloadable Participatory Community Assessment Studies and Guides

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.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/PublicHealth/research/centers/CAIANH/journal/Documents/Volume%2017/17%281%29_Johnson_Urban_Indian_Voices_49-70.pdf

Community Toolkit: Planning Steps
Livestrong Foundation
http://assets.livestrong.org/pdfs/Community_Tool_Kit_FINAL.pdf

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

Community Needs Assessments
Tracy Taylor
http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper16.html

Over the next two weeks I will continue to share with you how you can incorporate these solutions in a step-by-step fashion into the process of project design, funding, and implementation.

Sincerely,

Tim Magee

Tim Magee is the author of A Field Guide to Community Based Adaptation published by Routledge, Oxford, England.