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AUTHOR Kuh, George D.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a problem-focused needs assessment process for use by student affairs personnel. A comprehensive perspective of the needs assessment process is recommended, which views needs assessment as a necessary step in program planning, implementation and debriefing. Five types of needs assessment are identified and explained: (1) stakeholder perceptions; (2) program or policy justification; (3) satisfac- tion indices; (4) participative policy making; and (5) measurable improvement. Democratic and discrepancy definitions of needs assessment are enumerated and ways to overcome these difficulties are suggested. Major themes are outlined to provide a general framework for the work of a needs assessment team as well as the questions which must be answered. A review of the skills and staff required for assessing needs is followed by a brief discussion of the merits of internal and external needs assessors. The appendices contain instrument categories for data collection and outline major steps in the use of observation techniques, questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and existing documents. (NRB)

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A Comprehensive Overview of Needs Assessment in Student Affairs

by

George D. Kuh
Associate Professor
College Student Personnel Administration Program
School of Education
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405

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A Comprehensive Overview of Needs Assessment

in Student Affairs

> Three frogs fell into a barrel of cream. The first frog failed to correctly identify the "problem" at hand. Thus being poorly motivated to do much of anything about her plight, she stopped kicking, sank to the bottom, and drowned.
>
> Frog number two inappropriately diagnosed the problem as a windfall opportunity. For this ambitious amphibian, cream was a resource to be utilized fully. So she started in, frantically sopping up the cream. Of course the sheer volume of available resources soon outstripped the frog's digestive capacities. Now too bloated to swim, frog the second joined frog the first in toad heaven.
>
> The third frog was a different breed of critter, neither aimless like the first nor unrealistic like the second. Learning from her two late friends, she correctly diagnosed the problem as one of survival. Not knowing exactly what to do, yet realizing that something had to be done, frog three just kept swimming, slowly kicking, and paddling constantly as the cream got thicker, and thicker, and . . . thicker. After days of unceasing effort, the frog crawled up on top of the butter and jumped out. (Kuh, Hutson, Orbaugh, & Byers, 1979)

The moral of this story is really quite simple. In most situations that require a response, it is uncommon to have the luxury of sufficient time to analyze the problem at hand and the needs of those associated with the problem in detail. This certainly is true of student affairs staff. However, in order to determine needs and, therefore, appropriate institutional response to a problem, correct identification of the problem is critical.

Needs assessment can be considered as a form of problem solving and is a common topic of conversation among student affairs practitioners. Hanson and Moore (1978) and Evans (1980) have described ways in which student needs can be used to design programs. Lenning and McAleenan (1979) have presented some of the conceptual and practical issues associated with needs assessments in student affairs, and briefly summarized the steps in a needs assessment process. Yet nowhere in the student affairs literature has appeared a thorough discussion of a comprehensive needs assessment process. In this paper, a problem-focused needs assessment process for use in student affairs is outlined.

The Planning Perspective

Any attempt to articulate a cogent rationale for needs assessment in student affairs is susceptible to trite understatement. Serving students encompasses much of what student affairs staff do; therefore, it is a matter of fact that students' needs be assessed periodically for staff to decide how to best serve students. Standing alone, this perspective serves as a compelling argument for needs assessment activities. Using a more comprehensive perspective on the needs assessment process, student affairs staff recognize that needs assessment is an early and necessary step in the Program Planning, Implementation and Debriefing Cycle.

In Figure 1, this cycle is depicted as a planning process that begins with motivation to do something, perhaps stimulated by perceived or felt needs or wants. The Preformative phase of the Cycle represents the time during which a student affairs activity or program is conceptualized and planned. During this phase: (1) institutional or student problems that demand attention are identified; (2) the extent to which various kinds of needs are exhibited by the target group(s) is determined (needs assessment); (3) a decision is made concerning whether the student affairs unit or division has and will commit the required resources to mount an effective program directed toward the group's needs (front-end analysis); (4) and a plan is devised that specifically recommends goals for and components of a program designed to meet previously identified needs. (Note that the program's goals are established <u>after</u> needs are determined and that these goals should be compatible with division and institutional goals). The Preformative phase is guided by questions such as: What are the needs of various target groups the program is to address? If the program is to be based on a student development theory, what was the rationale for selecting the theory? Are the objectives of the program consistent with those of the theory? Does the staff understand the theory well enough to design a program based on the theory? How will program success be determined?

Insert Figure 1 about here

The Formative phase represents the period of time during which the activity or program is being delivered. A number of questions can be raised at this time to improve the program's chances for success: Are the persons in the program those for whom the program was designed? If not, what modifications can be made to the program to accomodate participants with different needs? Is the program being delivered as planned? Are the staff and program participants performing as expected? What things are happening that are unexpected?

The Cycle concludes with a period of post-program reflection. During this Summative phase: (1) an assessment is made concerning the relative merit and worth of the program; (2) if needed, modifications are suggested for subsequent iterations of the program; (3) or a decision is made to terminate the program. Summative questions of interest are: To what degree were participant's needs met? What other changes were exhibited by participants? Can other activities facilitate these changes or outcomes more efficiently? Should this activity be provided again?

In Figure 1, the proportions of Cycle time assigned to the respective phases are purposeful. For a student affairs program to be successful, considerable amounts of time and energy should be invested in determining the importance of and estimating the organization's capacity to mount the desired activity (Preformative). The time boundaries of the Formative phase are determined by the time boundaries of the program. The time required for the Summative phase depends on the relative magnitude and importance of the program to be evaluated.

This planning perspective and its utility for improving the quality of student affairs programs will be discussed in more detail in a later paper. The purpose of this brief discussion is simply to underscore the importance of the Preformative phase and the role of needs assessment in the design of a student affairs program.

Five Types of Needs Assessments

As experience with systematic needs assessment efforts has accumulated, needs assessment as a planning tool has evolved into a complex set of procedures. One insightful perspective on the various uses of needs assessment was suggested by Myers and Koenig (1979). They stated that several different types of needs assessments are available. The challenge to needs assessors is to select the most appropriate type for a given situation. In order to choose correctly among these types, the purpose for which needs are to be assessed must be determined (see Figure 2). It seems that at least five types of needs assessments may be used at various times by student affairs staff. In practice, these are not "pure" types; that is, when assessing needs several different purposes may be intended simultaneously and, therefore, two or more of these approaches may be used in combination. For purposes of simplicity and continuity, these types are discussed separatel; and needs related to the issue of coeducational housing are used throughout this section to illustrate the purposes of different needs assessments.

Monitoring Stakeholder Perceptions

This type of needs assessment essentially responds to the question, "What might we do?" This assessment attempts to stimulate new ways of thinking about the present situation or environment by collating responses from various stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, etc.). Some institutions, such as the University of Rhode Island, survey students at the beginning of each academic year to monitor students' attitudes or perceptions from year to year. If, for example, coeducational housing was an issue presently faced by a given campus, an assessment would be conducted to explore students' preferences for various types of housing options. In this approach, respondent perspectives are interpreted to guide subsequent planning. To be successful and helpful to student affairs planners, creativity on both the part of respondents and needs assessors should be encouraged.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Program or Policy Justification

In this type of assessment, the guiding question is "Why are we doing this?" In essence, the needs assessment is used to determine whether the options presently available are considered acceptable. It is possible to use the data resulting from this approach to document a favored position. To be most helpful, the needs assessment data should be presented in such a way so as to help both student affairs administrators and students understand the rationale for various decisions about housing options. For example, surveys of and interviews with students and parents may reveal that: (1) most first year students prefer to live in single sex halls, and (2) most freshmen are not well enough developed on the interpersonal intimacy dimension to benefit from the challenges of combined sex living units. In this case, these data seem to justify a single sex housing policy for first year students. However, it can be argued that for many freshmen, living in a coeducational hall would be developmentally powerful; that is, some students would develop more quickly on certain dimensions. From this illustration it is clear that policy decisions supported by what appear to be hard data are ripe for challenges largely because of the value differences that color various persons' perceptions of the data.

Satisfaction Indices

"What will happen if we implement each of the available alternatives?" is the question of interest in this type of assessment, currently very popular on most campuses. It can serve as a reflection of the positions of various stakeholders or subgroups (parents, alumni, faculty, etc.) concerning the issue or problem at hand. Hopefully, the data gathered in this process will provide an estimate of the trade-offs associated with each of the alternative programs or policies. For example, if a single sex residence hall is the only acceptable option to the majority of alumni and academic administrators, how many presently enrolled students will choose to transfer to another institution or how many prospective students will choose not to matriculate? What student development opportunities for what types of students are associated with each alternative?

Participative Policy Making

The question of interest in this approach is "What action should be taken?" With this approach there should be a direct relationship between the data that are gathered and subsequent programs or policies that are implemented. This reflects the traditional expectation for this process: an activity that involves various stakeholders in identifying their own needs and determining what institutional interventions are appropriate to meet the respective needs. For a needs assessment to encourage participative policy making, the implications of various alternative policies should be determined before the data are collected (Myers & Koenig, 1979). In other words, before the assessment begins, a commitment is made to implement the policy or program that the data suggest. In the coeducational housing option example, if most of the respondents preferred a particular housing alternative that was not presently available, the decision maker would be committed to attempt to implement such an option. Needless to say, careful consideration must be given to the relative viability of various options before asking respondents to share their opinion. By adhering to this caveat, student affairs staff can avoid creating unwarranted enthusiasm on the part of students advocating politically untenable or developmentally contradictory policies.

Measurable Improvement

The question, "How well did our chosen alternative(s) work?" is essentially a classic evaluation question. At this post-program revision point in the Planning, Implementation, and Debriefing Cycle, data are collected and analyzed to determine whether a previously identified need or want has been met. Of course, the initial data collection process is critical to determining whether this type of assessment is necessary or advisable. Using this approach, student affairs staff might compare measures of some dimensions of student development between single sex and combined sex hall residents to determine whether the needs of the respective groups were adequately addressed--in a developmental sense--during the year.

It should be noted that in the various types of needs assessment compared in Figure 2, the definition as well as the degree of need is not necessarily the same in each type. Through frameworks such as that provided by Myers and Koenig and field experiences with different needs assessment approaches, it has become clear that increased definitional precision concerning "need" is required to provide direction and meaning to subsequent needs assessment processes.

Definitions of Need

Two general definitions of need have been popularized during the past fifteen years. In the first definition, democratic, "need" was thought to be a change desired by a majority of some reference group. In approaches using this definition, students are assessed using available instrumentation and a group of experts or representatives from interested constituencies (the term "stakeholder" is now being used in this context) such as alumni, faculty, and students determine whether a "need" exists. This method of identifying need has been used in educational settings for some time. One of the more pervasive problems associated with this as well as other needs assessment approaches is making certain that the process correctly distinguishes needs from wants. That is, how can student affairs staff be certain that the "needs" identified through a democratic process are representative of critical and important elements that must be addressed in order for students to develop to optimal degrees during the college experience? What is inherent in the assessment process that ensures that "need" does not merely reflect activities or changes that are preferred or demanded for various reasons? It must be recognized that some wants, preferences, or demands on the part of students or others may, in fact, accurately reflect need. If ignored over a period of time, certain wants or preferences may, indeed, evolve into needs (Lenning, in press).

For example, student government's demand that it be granted autonomy in distributing student fee monies to all eligible student organizations may be refused by the institution's trustees. This issue could receive so much attention that the institution's stakeholders become embroiled in debate and student government finds itself paralyzed and unable to discharge its other responsibilities. In this case, a demand has evolved into a need that must be satisfied to permit a minimal level of functioning. The point to remember is that outside of unusual circumstances such as those described above, wants do not necessarily represent needs.

Related to the important distinction between want and need is the realization that the involvement of various stakeholders in the needs assessment process is a sine qua non for a successful needs assessment (see Kuh, Hutson, Orbaugh, & Byers, 1980). However, permitting some group or person(s) to ultimately determine needs without first systematically applying some consensually validated criteria is inappropriate in most instances.

A second definition often employed in needs assessment efforts, usually referred to as discrepancy, has been used in the majority of student affairs needs assessment efforts in the late 1970s. In this approach, need is defined as the difference between a student's or group's present state of functioning or performance level and the ideal or acceptable level of functioning or performance (Kaufman, 1972). In other words, needs are thought to be shortfalls in educational or personal development outcomes. This method of assessing need has become quite popular largely due to its conceptual simplicity (i.e., need = desired - present level of performance) and the apparent congruence between this method and the goal/objective/outcome mentality that has characterized higher education during much of the past decade. While the relative clarity of this approach is attractive, the discrepancy model of needs assessment has the potential to distort the validity and, therefore, the usefulness of the results.

The term "need" when equated with a gap or discrepancy often connotes negativism or the fact that something is missing. In reality, needs may exist without a gap being apparent. For example, most students must devote a certain amount of time to studying in order to remain in good standing academically. That is, to earn passing grades, some student effort (studying) must be expended to achieve this level of performance. In this example, studying can be thought of as a maintenance need in that a certain amount of study time is required for students to remain in school. If a student elected to attempt to earn A grades instead of merely passing grades (C average), the student probably would have a "need" to spend more time studying. This is an incremental need in that the student must study more hours than the number required to merely maintain a minimum level of acceptable academic performance.

Another variable to be considered in this example is that of resources. Resources required by students to earn higher grades may include enough time available for studying and a quiet place to study. While these two particular resources seem rather obvious, they are less so to some 18 year old first year students bewildered by the challenges related to managing emotions. Needs assessments based on a discrepancy definition usually emphasize incremental needs but typically are not sensitive to the existence of maintenance and resource needs.

The existence of other kinds of needs further challenge the utility of the discrepancy definition. Two examples are short-and long-term needs, and specific and generic needs. A student and an academic advisor who work together in planning the student's fall semester schedule may focus on the short-term need--an acceptable fall schedule consistent with requirements for the degree in a student's chosen major. However, a long-term need for career planning

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also may be present and, perhaps, more important. Consider the specific need articulated by a student union programming board to have a particular musical group appear on campus. While the need for a musical group may be real, it could be questioned whether the need is generic (scheduling a group that performs a particular kind of music) as compared with a specific need (a particular musical group). The point is that for student affairs staff to help students in meeting certain needs, a concomitant step in the process is to identify the kind of need.

Another persistent problem associated with the discrepancy definition concerns the degree to which the desired levels of performance can be accurately described. In many instances, the desired or ideal state (e.g., instrumental autonomy exhibited by all students) is difficult and sometimes impossible to describe. Another important consideration not accounted for by the discrepancy approach is level of necessity, particularly as it is contrasted with luxury or levels of performance that exceed minimal requirements for satisfactory performance. Some critics of higher education believe that when assessing educational needs, essential skills that will enable students to function adequately in society (e.g., those required for a minimal level of satisfactory performance in a particular vocation) should be evidenced before dealing with issues that appear to be superficial and tangential to the higher education enterprise such as the development of interpersonal intimacy. Others also have suggested that the kind of need identified will vary depending on the perspective from which need is approached. For example, psychologists usually adopt the frame of reference of the individual and tend to emphasize personal, affective components of need. Maslow (1954), for example, suggested that personal needs are arranged in a hierarchy, indicating that certain needs must be met before other needs can be recognized by the individual. Sociologists, however, interpret needs from the perspective of the group and concern themselves with issues that must be resolved collectively to improve organizational performance, thereby deemphasizing the importance of the individual's needs (Lenning, in press). As the number of student affairs divisions conducting needs assessments has increased, the problems alluded to above have been noted with increasing regularity and some needs assessors have taken steps to refine needs assessment procedures to account for these concerns. For example, Scriven and Roth (1978) and Coffing and Hutchins (1974) have dealt with the issues of level of necessity and degree of benefit (e.g., maintenance vs. incremental needs). As a result of their work, several more complicated but increasingly precise definitions of need have emerged. For example:

> "Need is a factor or element without which a person cannot function satisfactorily" (Scriven & Roth, 1978);
>
> "Need is something that can be shown to be necessary or useful for the fulfillment of some defensible purpose" (Stufflebeam, 1977);
>
> "Need is a necessary or desirable condition, state, or situation--whether it be an end result that is actuality (met need) or a discrepancy that must be closed between a current or projected actuality and a necessary or highly desirable end result (unmet need)--as judged by a relevant person or group using multiple objective criteria that have been previously agreed upon" (Lenning, in press).

The more recent definitions consider "need" to be a combination of <u>level of necessity</u> and <u>discrepancy on some dimension(s)</u>. This definitional clarity has been a major conceptual advance for needs assessors. In practice, however, the definition of need is usually determined by the procedures employed to identify and measure need. That is, it is possible (but probably not preferable) to conduct a needs assessment without defining need. In many instances, the purpose for which the activity is conducted ultimately determines the definition of need.

Common Errors in Needs Assessment

Although needs assessments often have been discussed, conducted, and reported, few detailed descriptions of the procedures employed can be found in the literature (Stufflebeam, 1977). Some procedures used by many student affairs staff have inherent weaknesses that tend to undermine the validity and, therefore, the usefulness of the results. The suggestions provided in following sections of this paper are somewhat of a marked departure from what has been previously referred to in the literature as "needs assessment." Therefore it may be helpful to consider what needs assessment is not before moving to what needs assessment is and how needs assessment should be conducted. The following examples are not exhaustive but are considered representative of commonly made mistakes to which needs assessors must remain sensitive.

1. The real reasons and purposes for the needs assessment are not apparent or understood by staff and students.

Who wants to have needs assessment data available? Why? What are the stated and unstated reasons for the study? A needs assessment commissioned by the director of residence life who has already decided "what residents need" could very well be used to validate what the director already believes to be true, or to conceal controversial needs that are thought to exist.

Even if the reasons for the assessment are legitimate, these reasons must be clearly articulated to those requested to participate or to use the findings. Some staff have reported feeling uneasy with the results of a needs assessment because they were uncertain whether the data were to be used to plan programs, or to provide an indirect estimate of staff performance, or both. As a result, staff morale suffered and the student affairs unit had to resolve problems created by the needs assessment process before they could move on to substantive issues identified in the process. It is difficult to overestimate the potential debilitating effects of not communicating the authentic reasons and purposes of a needs assessment.

2. The needs assessment is planned by one person.

One individual should never plan, implement, or interpret findings from a needs assessment. Several persons (e.g., four or five) representing different stakeholding audiences (e.g., faculty, administrators, students) will usually be more productive when brainstorming the variety of dimensions that must be considered in the planning stage. Seeking assistance from a second person will increase the number of possible solutions to potential problems by about 40%. A third person might well provide another 20%; and perhaps 10% can be expected from each of two more colleagues (Scriven, 1978). In short, get as much help as is feasible when conducting a needs assessment. The plurality of views will reduce the possibility that errors are made or important issues are overlooked and increase the probability that the needs assessment data will be used in program planning and implementation.

3. The target audiences are inappropriately selected or inaccurately described.

Whose needs are to be determined? When a residence hall program is planned, is the target audience defined as "all students in the living unit" or "specific subsets of students?" If staff needs are to be determined, which staff (division wide; specific level and assignment; present, past, future, potential) comprise the target group? (See Lenning & McAleenan, 1979 for a more detailed discussion of this issue.)

4. <u>A strength analysis is not performed.</u>

Needs assessment presents an occasion for a thorough review of student life programs and an opportunity to inventory the successes of the student affairs division. Who is available on the staff to assist in validating concerns and issues about which needs assessors should be aware? What human and financial resources are available to address the problems identified during the process? What exceptional services and activities are provided by the division and the institution?

Because the process tends to emphasize deficits or shortfalls, needs assessors often focus on aspects of the institution or division that may not be performing adequately. Establishing a list of the strengths of the institution can help to keep a balanced perspective as to its worth and bolster the confidence and esteem of the needs assessment team as well as others involved in the process.

5. <u>Contextual and systemic factors (location, staff, and student characteristics, political and economic climate, decision making and problem solving procedures, etc.) that may influence the study and the interpretation of the findings are overlooked.</u>

What is it that makes a particular residence hall or sorority unique? What are the resources within each respective group for enacting change? How fluid or open to change is the group under study? If a central office power struggle is in progress in the financial aids office, will the needs assessment data become a "political football" of sorts? (see Williams, 1978).

What are the norms for professional behavior or for student behavior? What communication patterns (who tal[illegible] to whom) can be identified? How are the answers to these questions like[illegible] [illegible]fluence the needs assessment process?

6. <u>The definition of need [illegible] is based entirely on a discrepancy formula; i.e., need defined as [illegible]istance between a desired or ideal state of functioning and present performance.</u>

The assessment of need is more useful when the definition used reflects a combination of discrepancy and level of necessity; that is, the degree to which something must be available for a person or group to function in a satisfactory manner. Desirable or ideal states do not necessarily infer necessity and therefore definitions that make exclusive use of desirable or ideal as reference points can be misleading at best (Scriven & Roth, 1978).

7. <u>A single criterion or method is used to determine need (Stufflebeam, 1977).</u>

Common mistakes in this area include the exclusive use of surveys and inappropriate use of the democratic process.

A. Surveys. Needs cannot be determined by asking students (or faculty for that matter) what they need no matter how insightful, honest, wise, and mature the respondents may be (consider the issue of confusing "needs" with "wants" alluded to earlier). Of course, surveys tend to be politically and economically feasible. However, a standard rule of thumb should be to use at least three different types of data collection methods to increase the validity of the findings. That is, if a "need" is identified through this triangulation process, the need probably exists and is not an artifact or a finding produced by the way the data were gathered than by the characteristics of the target audience.

B. Democratic Process. In some institutions or in certain residence halls, students vote in some manner to determine whether a need exists. The rationale for this procedure is based on the assumption that members of a higher education community can identify and articulate their "needs." In many instances, this assumption may be faulty. Certainly there are a number of issues about which students, faculty, and staff input is required. But to allow the community members alone to determine what is "needed" is not sufficient and may even be misleading. Furthermore, in some cases voting can serve to inhibit rather than encourage discussion about issues of importance. The range of needs identified and addressed during this process can be restricted by the inherent "win-lose" consequences of electoral processes. Rather than putting the determination of need to a vote, a preferred approach will include efforts to bring the various involved stakeholders to a reasoned consensus concerning important issues or needs consistent with information from emerging student and organizational development knowledge bases.

8. <u>The information about the study is withheld from general audiences.</u>

Needs assessors sometimes assume that no one can really understand or appreciate the needs assessment process. To do so, however, is misguided and can jeopardize the validity and subsequent utility of the needs assessment data. To the extent that it is feasible, students and student affairs staff members' questions about the process should be answered as completely as possible. Relevant information should be shared at open meetings, through the student newspaper, and through informal communication networks.

9. <u>Political pressure alone is allowed to determine need.</u>

Sometimes special interest groups convince administrators and trustees whether certain needs exist (e.g., exclusive single sex living accommodations) without substantial documentation. Whether needs exist, however, should not be determined by special interest groups alone. This suggestion like number eight, is a departure from accepted practice. Nonetheless, it is unacceptable to permit these processes to influence policy without recognizing and attempting to ameliorate some of the negative consequences associated with each. As more needs assessments recognize these constraints, more effective strategies for coping with them may be developed.

10. Needs are prioritized by a rating or rank ordering process.

Given the finite levels of resources, needs almost always will have to be prioritized. However, an apportioning process--while not foolproof--is preferrable to simple rank ordering. Apportioning or differential weighting requires that involved persons indicate the relative importance they place on particular issues or needs. For example, if students are asked to determine whether the lecture, film, and concert series are adequately meeting their respective "needs," a survey might result in the following rank ordering: films, concerts, lectures. A student affairs staff member could interpret this as a mandate for investing the available programming funds for movies. However, if the student respondents were asked instead to distribute $100 among the three areas according to their perceptions of how much of each they needed or wanted, perhaps the apportionment would be $40 for films, $35 for concerts, and $25 for lectures. Clearly, in this case, students think all three are important enough to receive some continued support. Rating or rank ordering merely indicates which programs are more important than others, not how much more important.

11. Positive and negative side effects are overlooked.

A positive side effect of a needs assessment process could be increased understanding on the part of students concerning issues related to the needs assessment such as the importence of developing autonomy and competence. A negative side effect could be reduced psychological support for institutional policies related to the apparent inability of the institution to meet students' needs intimated by the fact that an assessment is being conducted. Whenever there is an institutional intervention such as a needs assessment, some alteration in institutional dynamics can be anticipated. Although the exact nature of these dynamics cannot be predicted with unfailing accuracy, the general consequences usually can be predicted. In fact, some side effects could be so negative as to undermine the credibility of the needs assessment itself or to require redesigning the needs assessment strategy. Other consequences cannot be predicted but merely observed and dealt with after they have been identified.

12. Needs assessment is viewed as an end in itself.

It is not unusual for a needs assessment team to invest considerable time and energy in the process and to look forward to a "finished product." For some, the energy and commitment required to complete the needs assessment may be too great, and a "burnout" phenomenon may be experienced. The student affairs staff desire for closure is natural. However, this tendency reflects the incorrect assumption that when the formal needs assessment is completed, the needs assessment team has completed their charge. Perhaps the conclusion of a needs assessment does mark an end--an end to the beginning. Of equal importance is the next phase of the Program Planning, Implementation and Debriefing Cycle (Figure 1)--applying the knowledge generated through the process to the design of appropriate student development programs and systems. In fact, to be most effective, the needs assessment process should be recycled and students and student affairs staff encouraged to remain responsive to needs that may emerge over time.

Guiding Principles for Student Affairs Needs Assessments

In this section, six major themes or perspectives are outlined that, when considered together, provide a general framework for the work of a needs assessment team. Of course, contextual factors in the institution may mitigate against use of some of these principles. In general, however, they should prove helpful.

1. Needs assessment is problem-focused.

While needs assessment can be used to determine goals for a student affairs unit, it perhaps is most appropriately viewed as a problem-focusing strategy that has as its primary objective to identify unsatisfactory situations. In a problem-focused needs assessment, parameters are placed on the data gathering as a specific, narrowly drawn problem is identified. In this way, the risk of accumulating a good deal of general but not necessarily usable information about students is reduced. Problem identification in and of itself can prompt action in ways that recognition of goals or deficits may not. Problems demand responses because they tend to be inherently puzzling or troublesome. Goals often are so general that they are difficult to operationalize and, therefore, knowing precisely where to begin sometimes proves troublesome. In other instances, goals may be so specific that they do not apply and, therefore, are not of concern to many people.

Because problem-focused needs assessment attempts to identify unsatisfactory conditions, this process maximizes the tendency for persons to agree on what is not acceptable in cases where what is preferrable cannot be agreed upon. For example, most students are opposed to the destruction of residence hall furniture; but not all students agree on what should be done about it. Needs assessments that adhere to the problem focused perspective have a logical sequence, beginning with the identification of problems and ending with recommendations to ameliorate the situations related to these problems.

Needs Assessment is Continuous

Needs are not static; they change over time in kind and degree. Therefore, needs assessment should be viewed as a process that can never be completed. It

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can, however, perform a valuable "feedback" function to guide student affairs planning as problems are continously transformed during the course of examining related information. During this process, priorities may shift, the problem definition may require revision, and so on. Meanwhile, new information, new ideas, and new alternatives probably merit consideration.

Needs Assessment Guides Planning

The purpose of needs assessment is to inform and guide the planning of interventions or programs designed to bring about certain changes. Planning may be thought of as an exploratory response to a problem; it does not end when a plan has been drawn and a problem has been "solved." Proactive planning on the part of student affairs staff requires a continuing series of responses to emergent student and environmental challenges. Change implies improving the student experience in higher education, not merely maintaining the present level. Change usually accrues through a series of small steps. In effect, needs assessment helps student affairs planners to choose which small step should be taken next.

Needs Assessment is Multi-Faceted Data Gathering

Needs assessment proceeds from a wide-angled view of problems in which many ways of gathering information (e.g., surveys, archival data, individual or group interviews, observations, brainstorming and forecasting techniques, etc.) are used to arrive at a circumscribed view of student problems about which data gathering can be more sharply focused. When an acceptable focus is achieved, strategies can be devised to solicit helpful answers to specific problems, thereby making the data gathering more purposeful. This broad view-narrowing sequence then is repeated as new data and new or redefined problems surface.

Needs Assessment is a Public, Conscious Activity

To be politically and logically defensible, needs assessment must be a public and conscious effort to understand the requirements and perspectives of all individuals and groups associated with the problem. This approach requires collaboration--that is, faculty, administrators, students, and important others such as alumni and trustees should work together in a common problem solving effort. As discussed previously, voting to determine needs is not usually defensible because it usually is not public. A more justifiable strategy uses collaborative decision making and prioritizing through apportioning to acheive a reasoned consensus about how to proceed.

Because it is problem-focused, needs assessment is to be distinguished from strategies that rely primarily on basic research and dissemination campaigns, and from strategies that primarily utilize political power and coercion to serve the purposes of decision makers. Problem-focused needs assessment requires expertise, public involvement, and recognition of the pluralistic value orientations of various stakeholders.

Needs Assessment is Educational

Conducting an effective needs assessment in student affairs will result in assessors, planners, and decision makers learning more about themselves and their students. Needs assessment results will have greater credibility if, after the process, students as well as the staff intimately involved in the process know more about the institution, themselves, the living-learning environment, and the process itself than they did at the outset. That is, participants should be kept abreast of the needs assessment design, the preliminary findings, and the consequences of various administrative responses. of Participants also should be provided an opportunity to learn how and why a needs assessment is conducted and to experience the complexities of translating findings into action-based alternatives

Experience has shown that needs assessments that follow a predetermined plan often have a variety of side effects that prove to be beneficial both from an educational as well as a personal development perspective. Furthermore, if a needs assessment is conducted in an open and collaborative manner, the participants in the process--staff, students, administrators, and others--may adopt a different perspective of their institution and their relationship to the educational process; that is, they learn more about themselves and their respective roles in the institution. As a result, various groups and individuals may benefit in very personal ways (e.g., increased self esteem and clarity of purpose) that in turn serve to improve the quality of their contributions to the educational and personal development process. Ultimately, the learning environment of the institution is enhanced.

Questions to be Answered When Conducting a Needs Assessment

Needs assessment has evolved from informal, subjective judgment on the part of a few individuals to a set of systematic procedures integrated in the planning process. Nonetheless, needs assessment is most appropriately referred to as an "art" because it is not yet known what works best in identifying various types of needs in different types of institutional settings. Fourteen questions that should be answered when planning and conducting a needs assessment in student affairs serve as the framework in which the implementation of a needs assessment strategy can be considered. A thorough discussion of each of the following questions or steps is beyond the scope of this presentation. Some of the inherent pitfalls in needs assessment are described more full by Kuh et al. (1979) and Lenning & McAleenan (1979).

1. What is the "problem" or situation out of which needs will emerge?

A variety of methods are available for describing current states of affairs including a modified version of the nominal group process developed for the identification and solution of problems in a need assessment (see Kuh et al., 1979 for an illustration of the use of the nominal group technique in needs assessment). In most divisions of student affairs, adequate human resources usually exist to ensure satisfactory accomplishment of this step.

2. Is there a "need" for a needs assessment?

In some instances, needs assessments are dictated or required by external audiences (state and private funding sources) or by internal politics and policies. It is important to determine for what purpose and by whom a needs assessment is determined necessary, wanted, or demanded. In some situations, the timing for needs assessment may be inappropriate. In other situations, the political climate and level of trust in a residence hall or student services unit may require attention before a needs assessment can be effective. If the motivation for a needs assessment is authentic and legitimate, most rational planning groups can and should decide whether conducting a full scale needs assessment is worth the time and effort in light of the scope and potential payoffs of the proposed needs assessment project. This step essentially corresponds to a front end analysis (see Dalta, 1978) in which an appraisal of the organization's resources and commitment is performed to determine whether the planned activity is worth doing and is likely to be effective as it has been conceptualized.

3. Does the needs assessment team have the support of high level administrators?

As previously alluded to, needs assessment is a time consuming set of activities that requires a cadre of committed members representing a variety of stakeholders. However, gaining the support and commitment of top-level decision makers to the needs assessment process is critical to the ultimate success of the project. Without the endorsement and participation of central administration and student affairs staff, the needs assessment process probably will result in a futile exercise. Successfully completing this task will continue to challenge needs assessors in student affairs.

4. What are the purposes and expected outcomes of the needs assessment?

Guidelines for determining what the needs assessment could and should do are available from several different sources (see Houston, 1978). In the planning of a needs assessment in student affairs, often the options suggested in the Myers and Koenig (1979) framework discussed earlier are not considered. For needs assessment to deliver on its promises, more time must be devoted to systematizing this step. Once reasonable parameters have been identified concerning the scope and function of the needs assessment, the needs assessment team can focus its energies more clearly on an achievable set of objectives.

The following are suggestive of issues that should be considered at this point:

(1) Goals of the institution and division;

(2) The instition's readiness for change including support from key stakeholders;

(3) Specificity of desired outcomes;

(4) Resources available to respond to needs--fiscal, physical, and human;

(5) Target groups' awareness of and ability to articulate needs;

(6) Previous experiences with and reaction of the institution, division of student affairs, and students to needs assessment and planning.

One way for the needs assessment team to surface these kinds of issues is to brainstorm a list of conditions in the institution that facilitate or hinder

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the identified problem and the needs assessment process. To be useful, this list should be as specific as possible. For example, if the academic dean is opposed to changing the campus alcohol policy, the dean's position must be considered in the planning of a needs assessment around the alcohol issue.

5. Whose needs are to be assessed?

At first blush, this task seems to be fairly straightforward: select the target student groups and find out what they need! Yet, within groups of students may be different types of subgroups that may have needs substantially different from the larger group. The more students in the target group, the more likely one or more subgroups exist with sets of needs different enough from the larger group to question the validity of the findings and the utility of subsequent programs designed based on the results. Therefore, several related issues must be addressed at this point. Is it feasible for the needs assessment team to consider the various subgroups equally? Are adequate resources available to support these smaller scale needs assessment projects? This step is cumbersome but critical to obtaining valid information for planning purposes (see Lenning & McAleenan, 1979 for a more thorough discussion of this question).

All members of various subgroups need not be included to obtain an accurate assessment of needs. A series of data collection efforts with representative samples will be more efficient and will probably provide data equally reliable to a more expensive process that includes all students. Usually including more than 200 respondents (not the target sample but number of persons who actually participate!) will not be cost effective. Depending on the purpose of the assessment and degree of confidence required in the results, smaller size samples can be used (see Elliott, 1980 for an excellent discussion of this issue).

Also, some thought should be given to the advantages and disadvantages of early identification of the target population. Early determination of individual(s) or the group(s) to be assessed usually results in more efficient and perhaps more economical projects. However, it is possible that a premature determination of target groups may also result in excluding other groups of students that may have "needs" related to the problem. If the target populations are left undefined until the problem is clearly defined, needs assessment may become more complex and costly, but may also reflect student needs with greater accuracy.

It is also possible that the nature of the problem can provide a clue as to whether to specify the target audiences early or to postpone this decision. For instance, a history of continued resistance on the part of student government to allocate student fees to certain student organizations might prompt the needs assessment team to focus early on student government members as the target population. However, if a general negative attitude toward these student organizations prevails throughout the institution, it would be inappropriate to focus early in the needs assessment on student goverment as the target population.

6. What kinds of needs are to be assessed?

The existence and importance of different kinds of needs were discussed earlier (e.g., incremental, maintenance, and resource needs). The popularity of the discrepancy approach to needs assessment in student affairs has resulted in a good deal of confusion in this area; therefore, considerable attention must be given to this question during the planning of a needs assessment. It seems reasonable to expect that although student affairs staff may have difficulty specifying various kinds of needs to be assessed at the outset of a project, they can remain sensitive to the possibility that different kinds of needs may emerge during the project other than those on which they expected to focus.

7. How will the required information be collected?

In spite of numerous caveats to the contrary, many student affairs staff continue to rely on the residence hall or group survey to document needs. There is no question that surveys can be effective and particularly efficient forms of gathering information from a large number of people. But a survey alone cannot document need. In practice, most needs assessments will probably include some form of survey as one component of the data collection process. Most agree that information from interviews, open forums, and existing records (see Kuh et al., 1979) are likely to increase the reliability and validity of the process. In other words, multiple measures will improve the chances that the needs identified are, indeed, legitimate and should be attended to by program planners. In Appendices A-F, some of these methods are briefly described.

At this point, the data collection methods should be considered tentative. The methods and strategies to be used must be compared with the available resources to determine their feasibility. After this set of decisions, the needs assessment team moves from an ideal needs assessment design to a revised plan that can be implemented. A time-line including tasks assigned to specific individuals should be developed to guide the team's activities through this portion as well as later portions of the process (e.g., data collection, analysis, and reporting).

8. Have the data gathering devices been field tested?

By necessity, most needs assessment instruments are "home grown;" that is, they are locally constructed to answer specific questions about the residence hall or institution. It is imperative to determine whether the data gathering methods will provide the type of information deemed appropriate by the various levels of the needs assessment project. Requesting that a small number of students complete the instruments prior to mass distribution is a valuable and a necessary step. In most instances, revisions to the data gathering methods and instruments serve to improve the reliability and validity of the process. This step frequently is overlooked even though it is mentioned in almost every substantive discussion concerning needs assessment and research methodology.

9. Is the desired information being collected?

If the eight preceding questions have been adequately answered, this question usually is moot. However, during the needs assessment process, a variety of issues may surface that underscore additional points of interest or illuminate different kinds of needs not previously considered. It must be emphasized that needs assessment should not be viewed as a lock step process. It is not unusual for unexpected findings relevant to the project to surface. These should be considered as potentially useful and subsequently could result in other questions or groups being included in the process. The point is simple but noteworthy: as needs assessors, student affairs staff must remain open and responsive to incoming stimuli generated during the needs assessment, whether it be from the data collection process or from political statements by local stakeholders. This information can prove quite valuable later when interpreting and drawing implications from the findings.

It should also be noted that periodic checks may be necessary to make certain that the information being collected is consistent with what was intended to be collected and that these data are relevant to subsequent steps in the assessment process.

10. How will the data from the needs assessment process be analyzed?

In most needs assessments, this question may be the most difficult to answer. Unfortunately, the methodology presently available does not facilitate straightforward interpretations by student affairs staff. Particularly lacking are methods to integrate different kinds of information from different respondent groups. For example, how can information taken from a faculty/ student survey questionnaire be combined with interview or observational data from students? In many instances, elaborate statistical compilations may not be necessary for the needs assessment team but may be required for continued credibility with central administration trustees. Usually the integration of statistical treatments of data with rich, descriptive material from students, faculty, and staff will prove most useful in subsequent planning.

11. What are the implications of the needs assessment data?

One aspect of this question refers to how the available resources should be allocated to meet the identified needs of various student groups. These are difficult decisions and the best that can be done with existing technology is to use good judgment mixed with input from the stakeholders when the available resources are distributed to meet needs. Of course, contextual factors such as political, social, and economic climates as well as calendar year considerations (timing) are variables of great import. Interpretation of the results should be made from several different perspectives as various audiences or constituencies will be affected in different ways by the results and have different roles to play in the planning process.

12. Are the results of the needs assessment communicated in the appropriate forms to various stakeholders?

After substantial numbers of weeks and sometimes months involved in what may have been a complex and difficult set of activities, the temptation is great for a needs assessment team to produce a thick document with many tables of information. Unfortunately, most students and staff are not interested in immersing themselves in such a report but prefer to learn as quickly as possible the

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relationship of the findings to their respective audience. This limitation seems to be relatively easy to remedy, provided the reporting vehicle is guided by the following principle: Whatever is reported through whatever media (written, oral, story telling, pictures, etc.) should increase the consumers' understanding of the needs assessed during the process, and the process itself. In other words, needs assessment reports should address: (1) the pluralistic value orientations of different stakeholder groups in the institution including student affairs; (2) the original purposes of the assessment and any purposes and objectives added during the process; (3) the procedures used to assess needs; (4) how the findings are to be used; (5) the contextual factors in the institution and student affairs that will influence the interpretation of the findings and the implementation of subsequent programs designed to address student needs. A more thorough discussion of reporting methods is provided by Brown (1978).

13. Have the needs assessment data, implications, and recommendations been integrated into the student affairs planning process at the division, unit, and individual staff member levels?

This is the most critical question, the "bottom line" of needs assessment activities. For the findings to influence planning, all of the above questions will have to be raised in an open and collaborative manner and, as emphasized earlier, the commitment to the needs assessment process on the part of decision makers will have to be garnered at the outset of the needs assessment. To date, there is a dearth of case studies that report changes in student affairs planning processes, policies, and programs based on needs assessment findings. Given the recent flurry of interest in needs assessment, more detailed information about the utility of needs assessment data probably will be available soon and, hopefully, will provide insights as to how needs assessment data can be more effectively and efficiently incorporated in the student affairs program planning, implementation, and evaluation cycle.

14. <u>Are the target groups being monitored to document the continuing validity of the identified needs?</u>

A comprehensive needs assessment may take many months from start to "finish." However, needs change over time in kind, form, degree, and relative importance. Some monitoring is required to make certain the needs identified during the data collection are consistent with those that should be addressed by subsequent planning and programming modifications. It is likely that many needs assessments are judged to be ineffective because student needs have increased, diminished, or changed in kind between the time the original needs assessment data were gathered and programs were generated to meet these "needs." Also it is difficult to maintain the required level of staff enthusiasm and energy to continue the process beyond what seems to be a traditional terminating point. Nevertheless, this is a critical step and one that is overlooked too often.

These fourteen implementation questions suggest that needs assessment is a very formal, time consuming, and expensive process. In some cases, this will be true particularly in those situations in which the needs of many students or staff are to be assessed or when the relative economic and social costs and benefits of the needs assessment are great. However, the principles on which these questions are based can be addressed daily by a student affairs staff member in a much more informal way. This is not to advocate that snap judgements or an individual staff member's opinions can take the place of a comprehensive, well planned effort to assess staff and student needs. But, after becoming familiar with a formal needs assessment process and its underlying principles, it seems likely that many staff will be able to adopt some variation of the steps involved and apply them in their own specific setting. For example, two student activities/staff members who agree to serve as reality checks on each other can make a relatively informal needs assessment process pay dividends in their respective assignments. Not to be overlooked are student assistants who could benefit from and contribute (in a cost effective manner!) to assessing needs to be addressed by student affairs programs.

The questions included in Figure 3 correspond to the previous discussion. This checklist can be used in two ways. A student affairs administrator can review these questions with colleagues responsible for conducting a needs assessment to make certain the planning of the process is sufficiently detailed to ensure success. Also, the student affairs staff members responsible for conducting the assessment can use this checklist in concert with the other applicable sections of this monograph to monitor the fidelity of the process (keep it on target). For this latter purpose, the list should be considered hierarchial in that preceding questions must be answered satisfactorily before moving on to the next question or step in the needs assessment process.

Skills and Staff Required for Assessing Needs

As mentioned earlier, broad scope or more comprehensive needs assessments require a team of student affairs staff. To conduct an effective needs assessment, the members of the assessment team should exhibit certain compentencies so that on the team the following skills are represented:

Process consultation skills (small group process, nominal group process, etc.);

Interview techniques (in person and telephone);

Unobtrusive data collection techniques such as observation;

Knowledge of and experience with applications of human development theory;

Management of organizational change.

Other areas of expertise often required for a needs assessment process usually can be found on campus. Consultants from the institutional research office or psychology, sociology, and education departments often can provide assistance with tasks such as instrumentation development, sampling, and statistical treatment of data if required by the project.

These skills will probably be available on many student affairs staffs. However, for some assessment projects, it may not be desirable to use staff members. Rather, assessors external to the student affairs unit or the campus may be preferable in situations where the environment is politically charged and objective data gathered and interpreted by acknowledged "experts" are required. A brief discussion of the merits of internal and external needs assessors follcws.

Internal Needs Assessor

An internal assessor is any individual who is employed by the institution for which the needs assessment is to be conducted. Selecting assessors from the institution, particularly from the Division of Student Affairs has several advantages. Internal assessors are likely to:

(1) Be familiar with institutional and division contextual factors including attitudes of various stakeholders toward the issues the assessment is to address and the political environment;

(2) Be advocates for doing what is best for the institution and the division as well as for encouraging utilization of the results. Internal assessors live and work in the setting; therefore, their interest in seeing needs assessment labors bear fruit is quite high;

(3) Intimately understand the problem and institution. While knowledge is important, knowing the value of knowledge is equally important. For example, being aware of imminent collective negotiations is

knowledge. How those negotiations are likely to affect students requires a more thorough understanding of the variables involved;

(4) Have rapport with the audiences involved. This can shorten the implementation process because the assessors will be familiar with important stakeholders or key informants in the institution and will know how to contact them;

(5) Be relatively inexpensive. Internal assessors are already on the payroll; there will be few if any expenses associated with travel, long distance telephone calls, and so forth.

The disadvantages of internal assessors are likely to include:

(1) A potentially biased perspective of the institution, division, or program. Affiliation with an institution for some years may color one's perceptions of reality and constrict creativity;

(2) Questions of credibility raised by administrators, faculty, and students. Few individuals are considered expert in their own settings, although they may be competent professionals. The problem intensifies when administrators use this argument to refute an unpopular finding ("if we had someone who knew how to do a needs assessment, the findings would have been more accurate");

(3) Decreased autonomy. Internal assessors are not likely to be given any measure of authority beyond that vested in their regular position. The credibility question can also restrict their ability to experiment with different approaches to problem solving.

<u>External Needs Assessor</u>

The external assessor is a consultant who is not employed by the student affairs division or the institution. This person may live in the community, but will more likely be from out-of-town. The external needs assessor will probably serve as the coordinator of a team of internal assessors from the division of student affairs and is likely to:

(1) Have the confidence of administrators (bring in outside expert, etc.);

(2) Be relatively objective (has less of a vested interest in the outcomes);

(3) Bring a fresh or different perspective to the institution;

(4) Enjoy more autonomy and freedom to exercise creative judgment;

(5) Lend more credibility to the findings.

Disadvantages of external assessors are that they may tend to:

(1) Be relatively expensive;

(2) Not intimately understand contextual and systemic factors;

(3) Ingratiate themselves to program administrators in order to acquire future contracts;

(4) Be less available to assist system in making use of and interpreting the needs assessment findings.

There are no clear rules for choosing between an internal or external needs assessor. As in most other decisions related to needs assessment, there are trade-offs associated with the available choices. One way to capitalize on the strengths of both internal and external perspectives is to contract for an external person to supervise the planning and implementation of the assessment and make use of student affairs as collaborators and assistants in the process.

A Final Word

The relatively recent conceptual and methodological contributions to needs assessment discussed in this monograph have not been communicated adequately to student affairs staff. It is likely that the more complex and comprehensive definitions of need are perceived by some to be imposing and cumbersome. Most recognize and understand the limitations inherent in earlier assessment efforts but, as with any innovation, the newer approaches have been met with some resistance and suspicion. Yet, the frustration experienced by both those who have had some responsibility for conducting needs assessments and those whose needs have yet to be adequately addressed underscores the importance of an understandable yet comprehensive approach to the problem of identifying and meeting student needs in higher education. Therefore, the times and circumstances seem to warrant continuing efforts on the part of student affairs staff to improve needs assessment procedures.

Needs assessment seems to work best when conducted on a relatively small scale. That is, if the choice is between a campus-wide or residence hall level needs assessment, the hall-based approach is preferable since it will provide more immediately useful results. If the needs assessment options include a hall or floor level intervention, the latter would be preferrable for the same reason. By encouraging staff and students to become partially responsible for assessing their own needs as well as the needs of others, the process can become educative and synergistic. In such instances, the human connections between staff, students, administrators, and others are not relegated to an appendix of a report generated by the division of student affairs, but rather are emphasized by those who personally experience and benefit from the interaction.

The art of needs assessment has improved immeasurably during the past several years. As an integral part of the planning cycle, needs assessment has great potential as a tool to improve the student development efforts of student affairs staff--if it is understood and used by staff, students and administrators. However, enough ambiguity remains in existing needs assessment processes that for student affairs staff to be successful in such assessment efforts, it would be wise to keep in mind the common sense and perserverance exhibited by the third frog in the parable that introduced this paper. While creativity, hard work, and common sense have been underemphasized throughout the preceding discussion, these qualities are crucial to generating the kind of information needs assessments can provide to student affairs administrators about the students we serve and the programs we design.

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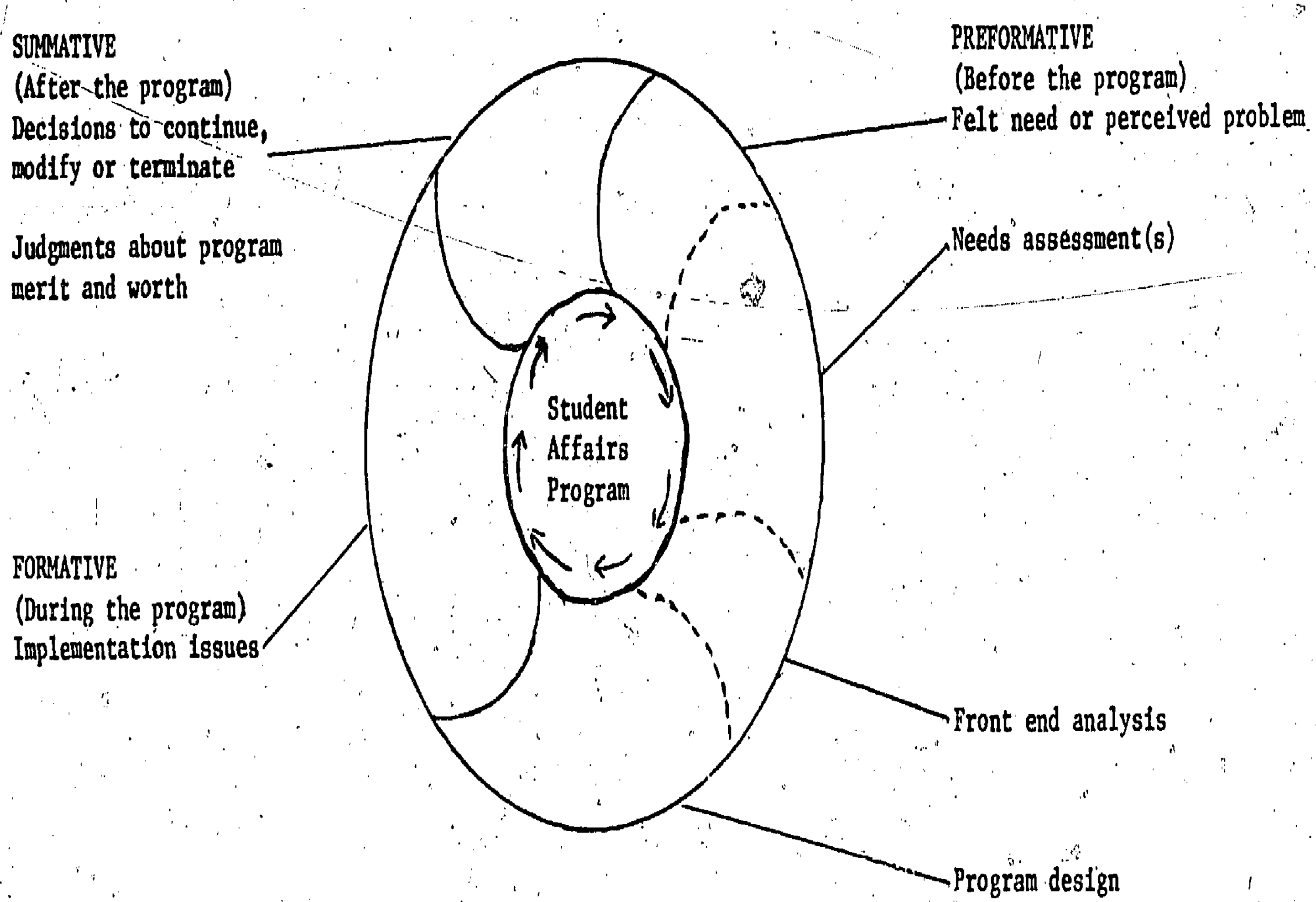
Figure 1

Program Planning, Implementation and Debriefing Cycle*



*The terms Preformative, Formative, and Summative are also used by program evaluators to describe purposes for evaluation activities.

Figure 2

Types of Needs Assessements

Type	Purpose	Advantages	Disadvantages
Monitor Stakeholder Perceptions	Generate ideas and document perceptions about various campus issues	Exploratory in nature; relatively threat-free	Needs and wants may not be differentiated; not linked directly to action
Program/Policy Justification	Collect information to support likely alternatives	Allows input into decision making process	Needs and wants may not be differentiated
Satisfaction Index	Estimate relative acceptability of various alternatives	Allows input; helps identify potentially controversial issues	Tends to emphasize "wants" over "needs;" may generate support for questionable or controversial activities
Participative Policy Making	Select the most acceptable policy or program from alternatives	Allows stakeholders to influence institutional response to needs	Potential to generate support for questionable or controversial practices
Measurable Improvement	Determine whether needs have been met	Document effectiveness of student affairs division; assess student development	May not attend to present problems or needs; focus on concerns previously identified

Figure 3

Needs Assessment Operational Checklist

1. Has the problem or paradox out of which needs will be addressed been identified and adequately defined?

2. Is a needs assessment the appropriate response to the problem?

3. What effects have previous needs assessments had on the student affairs program planning, implementation, and evaluation process?

4. What needs assessment methods have been used in the past?

5. Does the proposed plan or methods deviate significantly from previous efforts (an affirmative response may indicate that decision makers and participants should become acquainted with the need strategy prior to the actual assessment process)?

6. How can the needs assessment process be made as relevant as possible (e.g., involvement of students, faculty, others in the planning, etc.)?

7. Do high level administrators and student leaders understand the need for and support the project?

8. Who will sponsor the assessment (cover the costs)?

9. What are the fiscal constraints as to how much can be spent in the needs assessment?

10. How do these constraints affect the needs assessment plan?

11. Whose resources will be used (i.e., student affairs staff)?

12. Who will conduct the assessment?

13. Who will analyze the data?

14. When will the assessment be conducted?

15. Where will the assessment be conducted (all or certain residence halls, union, etc.)?

16. What groups outside the administrative structure (e.g., student government, alumni, etc.) have conducted needs assessments in the past? How can information from those assessments or those groups assist in this assessment? What are the tradeoffs in involving these groups?

Figure 3 (continued)

17. Have the objectives and expected outcomes of the needs assessment been clearly articulated to all concerned including students?

18. Whose needs are to be assessed (specify subgroups, etc)?

19. In addition to the needs assessment, what other concurrent requests are being made of students and other potential targets of the needs assessment? Can the needs assessment be designed and the administration of the instruments timed so as to emphasize the importance of careful consideration without putting undue burdens on students?

20. How do potential target audiences view needs? Are needs perceived as deficits that must be hidden from peers and others to maintain a sense of worth? Are needs acknowledged as areas for growth and development?

21. What types of needs are to be assessed?

22. In what form and through what methods will the needs assessment data be collected?

23. What assessment instruments will be used (e.g., active listening, interviews, questionnaires, observations--see Appendices A-F)?

24. Will the instruments to be used provide reliable and valid information about the groups to be assessed?

25. Will the process generate the kinds of information that were expected (see #17)?

26. How will the data be analyzed and reported?

27. How will the implications of the needs assessment data be drawn?

28. What will happen if the needs assessment findings suggest an institutiional or divisional policy change rather than additional student behavioral or skill development? How will decision makers respond to these data?

29. How can the findings be reported so that the data are used by various groups?

30. What changes in student affairs policy or programming could accrue or have taken place as a result of the needs assessment?

31. Are students' needs being met as a result of #30 and have other needs surfaced that require attention?

32. What have student affairs staff and students learned through the process?

33. What changes should be made in the process to optimize the chances that subsequent assessments can be effective?

APPENDIX A

Instrument Categories

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APPENDIX A

Instrument Categories*

Active Listening

In the active listening approach, students are sought out to discuss their situation. The student affairs staff member (data collecter) explains that the discussion is intended to illuminate needs (system wide, individual, or both) and encourages the student to present his or her view of needs. Only probing and clarifying questions are asked and the discussion is recorded on audio tape or in extensive notes.

Structured Interview

In a structured interview, specific questions are asked of all respondents. Usually the interview has an approximate fixed length; the student affairs staff member works from a list of questions and may or may not share them with the student. The questions are presented in sequence; appropriate probing questions are often anticipated on the interview protocol sheet. If the respondent strays from the question, that information may be disregarded. If the questions are not relevant to the respondent, limited opportunity is provided for restructuring them. Data are usually recorded on a form; interviews may be audio-taped as a secondary source of information.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire can be relatively client centered or system centered, depending on its approach. It may include questions which address needs directly, such as "Do you need help with _____?" or it may

* A modified version of materials prepared by Martha Williams, the NETWORK, Andover, MA, for the 1978 National Dissemination Forum.

ask for information only indirectly related to the respondent's perception of need, such as "Do students on your floor seek quiet places to study?" In the latter case, the information-seeking question may be followed by a more open-ended question, such as a "why" question. These may require a forced choice response (selection of one response from four or five options).

The questionnaire can probe information, opinions, or attitudes. Because it is a paper-pencil technique, instructions are usually contained on the questionnaire form and little guidance or encouragement is given for expanding the boundaries of the instrument. It can be administered individually or in large groups, through the mail or in person.

Checklist

A checklist, like a questionnaire and structured interview, can contain items directly related to need (such as a checklist of need areas) or items indirectly related to needs, such as a checklist of student characteristics or both. The respondent is required to select from among a fairly extensive group of alternatives. The choices are usually not limited to two; usually several responses can be checked, and often the responses are to be prioritized. Also checklists can be used to codify archival data (information routinely collected such as residence hall damage reports, roommate changes, participation rates in various student activities, etc.).

Observation

Student affairs staff using observation guidelines work at the site of activity and record within coded or structured data collection formats what they see and hear. This approach requires the observer to adopt a perspective from which the clients' reality can be interpreted. Because of the lack of interaction between observer and student, the perspective is not biased or influenced by the students.

<u>Additional Hints</u>

In selecting a particular type of instrument, the dynamics of using the instrument should be considered. If for example, interviews and questionnaires are used, the needs assessment team may wish to consider the following:

<u>Interviews</u>

- Require time of both interviewees and interviewers;
- Require scheduling of appointments at mutually agreed upon times and places;
- Provide opportunity for clarification of questions and responses with respondents;
- Provide a detailed look at respondent concerns.

<u>Questionnaires</u>

- Require initial staff time in developing or adapting a questionnaire for local use;
- Can be self-administered by respondents at their convenience but may not be returned;
- Provide summary information in readily quantifiable form.

APPENDIX B

Observation

APPENDIX B

Observation

Use observation techniques when:

1. First hand experience is required;
2. Respondents may not be able to provide required information;
3. The data collection plan can afford (fiscal and human resources) the time required for lengthy observations.

Major Steps:

1. Determine the observation format includings:
   a. Extent to which observation guide is structured prior to observations.
   b. Extent to which observer is or is not a participant in the activity being observed.
   c. Extent to which the situation to be observed is natural or contrived.
   d. Extent to which subjects are aware of observer's role and purpose.
2. Identify site or observational situation.
3. Gain access or permission to observe - establish an agreement.
4. Take overt or covert role of observer.
5. Establish trust and rapport (may not be necessary if observation is unobtrusive).
6. Record observations using one or more of the following:
   a. Predetermined schedule or checklist;
   b. Notetaking in narrative form;
   c. Tape record observations as they occur.

7. Analyze observations through focusing and categorizing process.

8. Write report summarizing observations.

For further information about observational techniques:

Bogdan, R., & Taylor, S.J. Introduction to qualitative research methods. New York: Wiley, 1975.

Jahoda, M., Deutsch, M., & Cook, S.W. Research methods in social relations. New York: Dryden, 1951.

McCall, J., & Simmons, J.L. Issues in participant observation. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969.

APPENDIX C

Questionnaires/Surveys/Inventories

APPENDIX C

Questionnaires/Surveys/Inventories

Use a survey questionnaire when:

1. Wide distribution is necessary (and resources will not permit telephone interview);
2. A sense of privacy is needed;
3. Complete uniformity in the manner in which questions are posed is necessary to avoid biasing responses;
4. Presence of interviewers are likely to affect responses;
5. Respondent needs time to secure or check the required information;
6. Obtaining unanticipated definitions of situations and quantifiable responses is not desired;
7. Self administration and logistical ease is desired;
8. Cost must be kept to a minimum.

Major steps:

1. Specify information to be gathered.
2. Frame required questions according to the following criteria:
   a. Clear and understandable;
   b. Logical sequence;
   c. Spacing and clear response format;
   d. Pretest questionnaire and modify if needed.
3. Determine to whom and how questionnaires will be distributed and how a high return rate can be realized.
   a. Distribute and collect at meeting of respondents;
   b. Self-addressed stamped envelope for return.
4. Compile results of questionnaire and summarize.

For further information about questionnaire and survey techniques:

Berdie, D.R., & Anderson, J.F. Questionnaires: Design and use. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1974.

Oppenheim, A. Questionnaire design and attitude measurement. New York: Basic Books, 1966.

Hyman, H. The interview in social research. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954.

ERIC

APPENDIX D

Interviews

APPENDIX D

Interviews

Use interviews when:

1. It is necessary to observe not only what students say but how (e.g., evasive, reluctant);
2. It is necessary to build up and maintain rapport to keep respondent interested and motivated to finish questions;
3. High participation by target group is needed;
4. The target audience is accessible;
5. Supplemental information may be needed for respondent's understanding and to prevent misinterpretation of the questions;
6. Resources will allow for expense of this method;
7. It is necessary for respondent to react to visual materials;
8. Spontaneous reactions are necessary with sufficient time and probes to recall relevant information;
9. Information about the students' personal characteristics and environment are needed to interpret results and evaluate the representativeness of the persons surveyed;
10. Time and resources permit proper training and supervision of interviewers (otherwise inaccurate or incomplete data may be recorded).

Major steps:

1. Specify focus of interview--information to be gathered and target audience characteristics.

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2. Establish time frame and identify interviewers.

3. Develop questions to be included in interview.

   a. Motivation for student to respond;

   b. Give the students an opportunity to influence policy or procedures through the interview;

   c. Be prepared for interview;

   d. Establish rapport;

   e. Record responses using students' own words;

   f. Be prepared to probe for clarification, amplication, etc:

   g. Summarize major points with the respondent at the end of the interview as validity check.

4. Analyze and evalute each interview as soon as it is complete.

5. Compile information from series of interviews into categories of responses and prepare a summary.

For further information on interviewing techniques:

Bingham, W., & Moore, B. How to interview. New York: Harper, 1959.

Gordon, R. Interviewing strategies, techniques and tactics. Homewood, IL: Dorsy, 1969.

Loflan, J. Analyzing social settings. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971.

Richardson, S.A., Dohrenwend, B., & Klein, D. Interviewing: It's forms and functions. New York: Basic Books, 1965.

Wolf, R. Strategies for conducting naturalistic evaluation in socio-educational settings. Occasional Paper Series of the Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, 1979.

Merton, R., Fisk, M., & Kendall, P. The focused interview: A manual of problems and procedures. Glenco, IL: Free Press, 1956.

Appendix E

Existing Documents

Use existing documents when:

1. Appropriate records are easily and legally accessible;
2. Resources limit the use of more expensive data gathering methods;
3. Time and space restrictions do not permit direct access to target population;
4. Naturally occurring data from the setting are desired as opposed to more contrived data from interviews, questionnaires, etc. ("Let the record speak for itself.");
5. Information is needed to supplement and substantiate information obtained through interviews and other methods;
6. Potential errors in records can be recognized and ameliorated through other needs assessment techniques;
7. Comparisons across record-keeping systems are feasible (similar formats, language, type of information);
8. Repeated measures of values, attitudes, etc. are desired over time.

Major Steps:

1. Determine data desired from records;
2. Determine appropriate sources or data (Random stratified or purposive sample of available documents is preferable);
3. Contact persons in charge of appropriate records and gain access to records.
4. Review records for desired information using document analysis tech-

niques (More than one judge is desirable for subsets of documents);

5. Summarize information obtained from each record or document with attention given to issues of completeness and accuracy ;
6. Collapse information across records using emergent categories to gain more general picture .

Possible sources of archival material include, but are not limited to:

1) Official reports and documents

Student transcripts;

Evaluation of professors;

R.A. reports;

Student affairs units' reports on particular programs;

Student government meeting minutes;

Library check out records;

Campus security reports.

2) Unofficial and personal records

Student affairs staff plans and diaries;

Articles in student newspaper.

For further information about archival material, consult:

Anderson, D., & Benjaminson, P. Investigative reporting. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Guba, E. Toward a methodology of naturalistic inquiry for educational evaluation, CSE Monograph Series No. 8, Los Angeles, CA: UCLA, Center for the Study of Evaluation, 1978.

Holsti, O.R. Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1969.

Williams, P.N. Investigative reporting and editing. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978.

Appendix F

Advantages and Disadvantages of Structured vs. Unstructured Data Gathering Methods

More Structured Instruments And Procedures

Advantages

1. Can be efficiently administered;
2. Yield uniform responses that can be quantified and easily categorized;
3. More suitable for problem verification;
4. Relatively inexpensive.

Disadvantages

1. May reflect assumptions and biases that influence the results;
2. Limit the range of responses;
3. Limit the depth of responses.

Less Structured Instruments and Procedures

Advantages

1. More suitable for problem identification and explanation;
2. Less likely to systematically influence the results (CAVEAT: interviewer bias may be present, however);
3. Provides opportunity to clarify respondent answers;
4. Permits in depth and far ranging responses.

Disadvantages

1. Accessible to individual interpretation;
2. Responses are difficult to collate and synthesize;
3. Time consuming;
4. Relatively expensive.