



BRIEF

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS IN CONTEXT

Methods and Considerations for CCNetwork Landscape Scans

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Understanding Needs In Context: Methods and Considerations for CCNetwork Landscape Scans

The National Comprehensive Center

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Context

Think back to the last time you were in a new place. First, you may have attended to various personal needs. Perhaps you were late to an appointment and needed to know where to go and how to get there in the fastest and most reliable way. You may have looked around to gather information that could help you decide what to do next. Maybe you noticed some kind looking strangers who could point you in the right direction. Or you saw a map, or noticed a taxi idling nearby. That approach—examining the field and leveraging what you learn to make decisions about the best next step—also describes a **landscape scan**.

In many cases, we begin our work in the CCNetwork by assessing client needs—speaking with our clients, examining current evidence and data, reviewing documents, and identifying patterns across those. **Needs-sensing** methods are important inputs to helping us shape and prioritize what we do. **Landscape scans** take our efforts a bit further by helping us interpret needs *in context*. A landscape scan is a helpful method to understand:

- » whether the needs you have sensed reflect broader trends,
- » whether there are existing resources related to those needs,
- » whether there are certain students, settings, or professionals that experience these needs more or less than others, and
- » whether supports are equitably available.

Informal or rapid scans of the field are sometimes the best way to get a quick read on our client’s needs, particularly when time or other resources are limited, or when it is urgent to develop a preliminary understanding of trends and existing resources.

Below, we focus on formal landscape scans, which employ systematic data collection methods and thorough synthesis of findings and recommendations. These scans are designed to be shared—in other words, the content, format, language, and tone are selected with a specific audience in mind to support their learning and ability to act on what they learn.

We define a formal landscape scan as one that:

- » is driven by clearly defined guiding questions
- » demonstrates awareness of a target audience through content, format, language, and tone
- » employs systematic approaches to collecting data
- » defines insights, recommendations, and/or next steps, and
- » acknowledges its own limitations.

Through systematic review, landscape scans can help Centers connect our clients with the right supports and/or elevate new capacity-building products or services. This brief will explain methods and offer suggestions for conducting a landscape scan.



How Do I Conduct a Landscape Scan?

We suggest the following steps for conducting a landscape scan. While each of the following actions is important, the process may not be linear. For example, you may “complete” your scan, but continue to update it with new data or resources over time.

- 1. Plan:** Identify the purpose of the landscape scan, define your audience, and establish the questions that will guide your work. Select the data collection methods that will best serve your needs, and create a plan to collect data.
- 2. Scan:** Collect information, documenting how it aligns to and informs the guiding questions.
- 3. Analyze and Synthesize:** Examine the evidence to draw conclusions about your findings. Consider the implications of your findings on recommendations or next steps.
- 4. Report and Share:** Report your analysis and findings, focusing on the insights you have drawn and actionable next steps. Share your findings with your audience, including with other Centers¹ and partners.

Plan

To plan your landscape scan, work with your colleagues or clients to formulate guiding questions, thinking together about what you are most interested in learning, and whether you have any hypotheses about existing resources or gaps that you would like to explore. Consider the purpose of the scan, articulating how the results

What is a Landscape Scan?

A landscape scan provides an analysis of the field (or a section of the field) to communicate overall opportunities, needs, and gaps. A landscape scan can also be referred to as a landscape analysis or field scan.

For an example of a CCNetwork landscape scan, review this scan about resources for racial and social justice in education.

[Ensuring Racial Equity in Education: Landscape Scan and Next steps](#)

Example Guiding Questions for a Landscape Scan

- » How common is this need? What has been done to address this need in the past?
- » Are there certain populations that are experiencing this need more than others?
- » What do we know about what has worked well to address this need, for whom, and why? (Include policies, programs, and practices.) What do we know about what has not worked well, or what has exacerbated this need?
- » What individuals or organizations are doing good work related to this need?
- » What tools and resources are publicly available to address this need? Do the populations with the greatest need in this area have access to these resources?
- » What additional supports are needed to ensure this need is met? How can my organization best contribute to the solution?

¹ Throughout this document, “Centers” refers to federally-funded technical assistance and research centers.



will be used. This is important for guiding the scope and depth of your approach as well as how you will communicate your findings.

Develop a plan for collecting data. Before you can begin gathering data in earnest, decide the sources from which you will collect data. Landscape scans can employ a range of data collection methods; be sure to select the method (or combination of methods) that is best suited to your audience and guiding questions, and is feasible given resources. While collecting a great deal of data or using several methods might seem appealing, keep it simple. Too much data can be overwhelming, and unhelpful methods can waste time and money. Some scans focus exclusively on secondary data sources (i.e., existing evidence). This might include identifying resources, articles, research, and supporting documents that are available online. Other scans may require the specificity and timeliness that primary sources of evidence provide, such as interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

Next, establish the mode in which you will document what you find and will support further analysis. While several tools, like a text document or even presentation slides, will get the job done, we recommend using a spreadsheet, given its unique features such as sorting, filtering, and organizing qualitative and quantitative data, in addition to its analytic capabilities. You may also consider using a web-based platform, like Google Drive or Box, which will allow you to manage versions and collaborate more easily with your colleagues.

Finally, consider the format in which you will share your findings or recommendations. If you use Excel or Google Sheets, you will likely share this part of your scan in a text document or presentation slides. Considering the format before collecting data will help ensure that you document data with the appropriate level of detail and in ways that will be most useful when you analyze and synthesize what you have learned.

Scan

This is the fun part (and the part with which you are likely most familiar). There will be times when you may want to collect data from every person or source in your target population—particularly when the population is very targeted. For example, it might be completely within your means to interview each of the chiefs from the state education agencies (SEAs) in your regions, or to review documents from every Center.

Of course, it is not always possible to collect data from every potential source. If you plan to identify a sample from which to collect data, carefully consider not only the resources required for each sampling technique, but also how reasonable and appropriate each technique is in light of your guiding questions. For example, when distributing a survey to SEAs across the country, it may not be necessary to survey *each* SEA - a purposive sample of SEAs based on geography might be equally informative. Or perhaps you are conducting interviews about evidence-based literacy practices, in which case you might use a snowball sampling approach, asking each interview participant to suggest one or two more experts with whom you might speak.



You might also consider engaging your audience in your selection of sources. For example, if you are doing a scan about teaching practices in STEM for SEAs, you might reach out to curriculum leads at the SEA to ask for recommendations for teachers you should interview. Even low-investment strategies, like crowdsourcing ideas (a strategy by which you solicit input or information from a large group of people, usually via the internet) could increase the quality of your scan and ensure that your audience buys into your findings.

Engaging your audience is also one of many ways to ensure that your landscape scan is diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Below, we share examples of approaches that could help ensure representative stakeholders, ensure data quality, and communicate across differences. Considering these and other approaches will not only honor the long-term equity outcomes of the Comprehensive Center program, but also will increase the quality, relevance, and utility of your research and any subsequent findings. This [brief about diverse, equitable, and inclusive evaluation approaches](#) includes additional strategies and examples; though it is focused on evaluation practices, much of the information will also support the landscape scan process.

Table 1. Example approaches for ensuring diverse, equitable, and inclusive research

If you are...	You might...
Conducting interviews with educators	Plan a wide array of interview times, including evenings or weekends, to accommodate school schedules. Ensure participating educators are representative of the range of educator backgrounds and experiences within the state, district, or school.
Distributing a survey for students or families	Offer your survey in multiple languages based on demographic data about students and families
Conducting a literature review about online engagement strategies for special education students	Seek out strategies that are designed for a diverse set of students, including students of color, English language learners, or students of all genders
Reviewing documents from a range of school districts within a state	Ensure you have sampled documents from a range of districts that include urban, suburban, and rural geographies; a range of district sizes; and student demographics that are representative of the state as a whole.

Finally, a landscape scan provides an analysis of the field, but only at a single point in time. In some cases, this will not change your process or findings. In other cases, it will. Perhaps you complete an initial analysis of your data and recognize that there is a large gap that could be filled through additional data collection. Or perhaps you are examining a particularly dynamic topic, one that changes quickly or dramatically in a short period of time—a situation in which you might consider re-scanning sources at specific intervals before you share your findings.



For example, it seems that every day we learn more about high-quality virtual instructional practices. In this case, you might scan sources several times before sharing your findings. Imagine you are conducting a scan about these practices. You would collect data, perhaps by interviewing a diverse set of experts and reviewing the virtual learning plans from several districts in your region. As you begin analyzing and synthesizing what you have learned, you might conduct follow up interviews, with the same or a different set of interviewees, and also review the virtual learning plans each week for an additional three weeks.

Given your topic and the scope of your research, you will need to decide the intervals at which you re-scan, and the number of times you do so. What is most important here is that you consider if a re-scan would benefit your audience or expand your findings. Finally, remember that you can always re-scan after sharing your findings, particularly if your audience or clients express that it would be helpful to do so. Under these conditions, scans can be dynamic, representing the best knowledge available at a given time and committing to regular updates as new information becomes available.

Analyze and Synthesize

A landscape scan is an insight-driven methodology. While identifying sources and collecting data are important parts of the process, **the ultimate purpose of a scan is to elevate what is most relevant and salient for your audience and make recommendations to support their work.**

It is likely that you will begin noticing patterns, themes, or trends that get at answers to your guiding questions before you have completed your scan. As you proceed, look for opportunities to:

- » elevate evidence-based or promising practices
- » identify gaps, like unanswered questions, a lack of consideration for key student populations, or a dearth of evidence-based practices, and
- » make recommendations about next steps, including suggestions for capacity-building approaches to address gaps or high-leverage problems.

Document your analysis, including notes for the additional data you might seek if you were to revisit your scan. You should also begin to think about the limitations of your methodology and findings, as this information will be helpful to your target audience.

This is also another step of the process at which you can pursue equitable approaches to research. As you interpret the data you have collected and begin to draw conclusions, carefully document the decisions you make and why, so that a colleague can review and provide feedback on your work. If you do ask someone else to review your work, seek out a colleague with professional or lived experiences that differ from yours, asking them to check your assumptions or help expand your interpretations or analysis.



Report and Share

It is time to write up your results! We propose that you go beyond sharing a spreadsheet or annotated bibliography. While those are appropriate for informal or rapid scans, the formal scans we are writing about here are designed to be thorough and maximize opportunities to share with and learn from others in the CCNetwork.

You may consider sharing a clean version of your data collection documents, along with a PDF or presentation slides that communicate your findings and recommendations. Before diving in, consider where or how you will share your findings. If you plan to share your work on your Center website, a PDF probably makes sense. If you plan to host roundtable discussions or a webinar based on your research, then presentation slides will be best.

The structure of your report will vary depending on the topic and breadth or depth of your scan. In all cases, you will want to articulate the circumstances or context that precipitated the need for a scan. Share your guiding questions early on, and summarize your insights or key takeaways at the beginning of the report. After sharing your recommendations or next steps, include a brief section on your methods and potential limitations.

It is possible that you have discovered an abundance of potentially interesting findings, or opportunities that point you in several different directions. Be sure to focus on the findings that most closely align with the scope and mission of your Center, along with your guiding questions. Lingering questions can be discussed at the end of the scan to guide future work or next steps.

The CCNetwork aspires to ambitious long-term outcomes: improving educational opportunities and academic outcomes for our country's most vulnerable children. Our ability to make progress toward those goals relies on how effectively we respond to problems and how efficiently we collaborate. Sharing your scan, analysis, and findings furthers the CCNetwork's goals. Sharing also helps avoid duplicated efforts—other Centers can explore your data or build on your findings instead of replicating the original process. Finally, the gaps or next steps you have identified offer an opportunity for meaningful collaboration or collective action among Centers.