

EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FFA CHAPTER RECOGNITION: A MODEL FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

This article presents a strategy for integrating community service learning with community development. It builds upon two methods in rural development: needs assessment and incorporating public schools in the development process. The strategy provides a way to have a valid needs assessment using survey research and at the same time keep costs low and involvement of local people high. It also provides students an opportunity to have classroom and experiential learning on community development and needs assessment. This strategy has been pilot tested in Florida. Opportunities abound for agricultural education programs and their respective FFA chapter if they choose to lead in such an endeavor.

Few communities build a foundation from which their young people can develop into involved citizens. They neglect to foster important leadership skills and relationships between people, young and old. But, making the effort to involve young people in community affairs can forge new bonds between students, teachers, and citizens, while helping to solve community problems. Through community involvement, youth can increase their understanding of and commitment to their community, and can become empowered to work toward solving local problems. Youth can be an important part of community efforts to respond to longstanding problems and emerging needs.

Community involvement and support are also the cornerstones of a successful agricultural education program. Through interaction with advisory councils, school administrators, parents and local government agencies, agricultural education programs and FFA Chapters have the opportunity to become involved in community service projects.

In 1971, the National FFA Organization officially recognized this important component of agricultural education programs by sponsoring the

Building Our American Communities (BOAC) Awards program. This program received federal attention when it received the National Volunteer Action Award in 1982, 1983, and 1984. In 1995, BOAC was incorporated into the community development component of the National FFA Chapter Award which has five categories of chapter involvement. They are:

Economic activities conducted to improve the economic welfare of the community;
Environmental activities conducted to preserve natural resources and develop more environmentally responsible individuals;
Human resource activities conducted to improve the welfare and well-being of members and citizens of the community;
Citizenship activities conducted to encourage members to become involved in their school, community and county; and
Agricultural awareness activities conducted to help the public become better informed about the food system and related agricultural issues (National FFA Organization, 1995, p.4).

Though community service projects provide leadership training and educational experiences, these can be enhanced by assessing local needs and developing the community. Focusing on needs assessment and community development can help answer several of the questions related to selecting a community service project: Will its effect be short or long term? Will the entire community benefit or a certain sector? How do we decide which project to target this year and in future years? The local Agriculture Education program and the FFA Chapter can have important roles in their community's development through the implementation of a needs assessment.

Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this article is to portray a community service program which focused on community development. This program involved students, teachers and community leaders in a collaborative effort to identify and address local needs. Using this project as a case study, the objectives were to:

1. Identify the process of implementing a school-based community needs assessment.
2. Describe the partnerships and educational experiences that help develop leadership and civic responsibility through participation in the needs assessment project.
3. Identify the opportunities for agricultural education programs and FFA chapters to become involved in community service and community development projects.

Two Approaches to Developing Needs Assessment

Needs assessment has long been an important community development tool, but it is often expensive to undertake. Needs assessment can

identify unmet needs in the community, provide evidence of support for policy options, and increase public involvement in policy making.

If done well, needs assessment is both a process and a method. As a process, it can build leadership, group cohesion, and a sense of local involvement in the community. Some methods of needs assessment, such as surveys and focus groups, provide residents with a vehicle for developing their capacity to help themselves (Christenson, 1989). As a method, needs assessment is a tool that helps a community plan for and implement strategies in areas as diverse as crime watch programs, business expansion efforts, and youth recreation (Fischer, 1989).

Of the many approaches to needs assessment, the survey is one of the more popular. While we firmly believe surveys can provide excellent information for needs assessment, local groups must be committed to using the survey. When local people conduct a survey, they become committed to using the results.

We also recognize that surveys need expertise, time, and resources in order to be accurate and relevant. Many community groups, however, lack the money to hire a survey organization to conduct a survey or a consultant to provide technical advice, yet could benefit from the information of such a survey. The problem becomes one of generating a local survey that is 1) useful and relevant; 2) scientifically valid; and 3) affordable. Many locally-initiated attempts at surveys have fallen short on one or more of these criteria (see Salant & Dillman, 1994).

Community Service Learning

Many researchers and policy makers have suggested that public schools, particularly rural schools, need to be more involved in community affairs in general, and in community development activities in particular (Hobbs, 1994; Mulkey, 1992).

They argue that public schools are a valuable community resource that, in terms of development activities, have been largely untapped. Further, development projects involving public schools provide excellent educational opportunities for students.

Effective leadership and citizenship requires that people understand their community and its place in the larger society (Hobbs, 1989). Much like practicums, on-the-job training, and internships, community service learning helps to provide students a “real world” educational experience. Students can learn more about their community and their role as citizens through service projects. Service learning projects have included school based businesses, class projects to improve the community, research projects on issues or historical perspectives, and school curricula sensitive to community needs.

Many community service projects generally result in individual, voluntary efforts with local service agencies but does not build effective community leadership because a framework to involve students in group decision-making, problem solving, and collaboration is often missing, leaving the experiences as isolated, individual actions (Boyle, 1991). Those advocating community service programs argue that projects should increase teamwork among students, teachers, and community members (Silcox, 1991); foster the ability to contribute in a democratic society (McPherson, 1991); and empower students (Boyte, 1991). To do this, relationships between youth and adults must shift from youth being passive recipients to being active members of a team which decides on and carries out programs (Kurth-Schai, 1988).

Integrating Needs Assessment and Service Learning

The authors would like to suggest a strategy that integrates community service learning with

community needs assessment project, each building upon the other. By involving agricultural education programs in a survey, some of the problems of conducting a legitimate needs assessment can be addressed. The high school (and its students) offer labor, expertise in computers (and possibly statistics), potential respondents (in the case of a student survey), and a location to conduct the survey.

At the same time, involvement in a needs assessment project can provide an opportunity for students to actively participate while learning about community development and strategies of needs assessment. This type of project lends itself well as a cooperative effort between the agricultural education program and other classes, such as government, computer sciences, and civics. By incorporating a needs assessment into the instructional program and into an FFA Chapter activity, the students can play important roles in the project.

The key to successfully building leadership and collaboration skills is to structure the needs assessment so that: 1) students actively participate; 2) partnerships with other community groups and agencies are created; 3) materials are available for students to learn about community development and needs assessment strategies; and 4) students are provided ways to get involved in implementing findings after the needs assessment has been completed. The challenge is in maximizing the needs assessment’s scientific rigor at the same time as the students’ and local groups’ involvement.

Implementing the Needs Assessment: A Florida Example

A needs assessment project in Immokalee, Florida, was initiated by a small group of local leaders. They wanted to obtain information from residents before committing their limited resources to any specific project. The County Extension Director consulted with an Extension specialist and

began developing a partnership among local leaders, the high school, Extension, and other organizations needed to support the project. The focus of the partnership was two-fold: to generate information for community leaders' decision-making and to supply high school students with enhanced educational experiences. Several local leaders played key roles in obtaining the interest and cooperation of high school administrators and, later, in supporting the students' efforts. A local telephone company donated 10 phones to facilitate the interviews.

After meeting with the County Extension Director and high school principal in late 1991, a social studies teacher decided to have two classes of seniors and juniors participate in the project. A few students from outside these classes volunteered. Nearly 60 students participated.

The students participated in a series of activities, including a question writing and questionnaire design workshop, which were created to provide them with the chance to make significant contributions. The questions written by the students were combined with those of community leaders in developing the survey. An Extension specialist assisted the students and community leaders with wording and formatting the questionnaire in order to minimize measurement error.¹ Students also developed materials to promote citizen participation for the survey, including the slogan, "Don't Hang Up On Immokalee," for use in the media.

The students participated in interviewer training sessions and conducted interviews. A total of 434 interviews were completed -- 287 by the students and the remainder by Extension program assistants -- out of a reachable sample of 694 (a response rate of 62.5%).² Adult supervisors monitored the calling and helped students learn to deal with problem cases. During scheduled classes, students discussed the survey to better understand the process. One

student spent over 24 hours creating a computer dataset from the completed surveys.

Despite the "well-laid" plans, there were problems. But the students persevered and overcame these difficulties, thereby learning an important "real life" lesson. To help maintain morale, a member of the leadership group sponsored a pizza party for the students after they had completed half of the interviews. In addition, a recognition program was held at the completion of the interviewing.

After the interviews were completed and most of the students graduated, six attended a meeting and helped to plan presentations for various civic and governmental organizations using results from the analysis conducted by an Extension specialist. Subsequently, three students, along with the Extension Director and teacher, conducted 14 presentations for a number of community organizations.

Experiences Gained by Students

As described above, students were given opportunities to make significant contributions and a few took on leadership roles, by working to promote the survey, creating a database, and presenting the results to the community. Impacts on the students are described below using information from focus group interviews (see Israel et al., 1993).

Learning About Needs Assessment

Many students indicated that they better understood the needs assessment process: *"I learned that it took a lot of people to complete the survey because there are people involved in different levels and stuff."* While making a total of 3,149 dialings, most developed skill in interviewing and learned to handle a variety of situations, including refusals: *"When you're talking to them at first you get nervous, but after a while you get*

comfortable." By completing interviews, students felt a sense of achievement: *"Felt like you did something."*

Learning About Their Community

Most students were already aware of many of the problems facing their community prior to the project. But by interviewing residents, some students appeared to have developed a broader view of local problems: *"We see things differently now...Because by asking, I'm thinking more as I ask these surveys."*

Aspirations for Future Involvement

During the pre-program focus groups, some students offered only general comments about whether they would get involved in community affairs. Subsequently, few students at the follow-up focus groups expressed aspirations for continuing their involvement in community affairs after graduation. Of the those who did, the needs assessment project was viewed as a springboard for that participation: *"Well, I'm more likely to be involved because here I've been involved in this already and I want to see it keep moving forward." "I think I'm more likely 'cause I really liked it [the project]."*

How the Survey Helped the Community

The following shows two examples of how the survey information was used:

- The YMCA used information about recreational needs to develop a priority program for middle school youth. One student involved in the project worked on the task force for this program.
- Of 131 individuals who were nominated as community leaders during the survey, 44 attended a planning meeting. Using the survey,

these leaders selected two priority issues as the focus for their efforts.

Creating a Successful FFA Needs Assessment Project

The success of the needs assessment project in Immokalee, Florida, can be replicated in other communities. A number of criteria were identified for creating a successful community development project based on experience in Immokalee (see Table 1). The coordinator's job is perhaps most important to the projects' success and entails a significant time commitment. Partners from the community provide moral support, contribute material resources, and volunteer as facilitators. Students can conduct many survey activities, including writing questions, preparing promotional messages, sampling, interviewing, data entry and analysis, and presenting the results.

Activities to learn about community development and needs assessment and reflective discussion help students to build a cognitive framework and better understand the project. Combined with activities to celebrate project milestones, these can build students' sense of achievement. The accompanying examples show how a needs assessment project can be applied to an agricultural education program and its respective FFA Chapter. The information generated by the needs assessment project in six months or a year can serve as the basis for selecting community development projects for several years.

Concluding Comments

Linking community service learning with community development can effectively meet the needs of some rural communities. The successful implementation of the community needs assessment project illustrates that students can make significant contributions to the development of their community and at the same time gain valuable experience. The partnership of high school students

Table 1. Criteria and Examples for a Successful Community Development Project

<i>Criteria:</i>	<i>Examples:</i>
1. Commitment of Project Coordinator	Local agricultural education program selects needs assessment as community development project for year; teacher coordinates project.
2. Active Community Partnership	County or City Business and Industry Council pledges support; members assist in project.
3. Support from School Administrators & Teachers/Use of School Facilities	Principal supports project; computer science and government teachers involve class in project; facilities are made available for telephone interviewing and for administering survey in classes.
4. Involvement of Students	FFA Chapter conducts telephone interviews; computer science class and FFA Chapter codes and key punches data.
5. Activities to learn about Community Development & Needs Assessment	Ag education and government teachers jointly develop lesson on community development. Teach to students in respective areas.
6. Reflection Exercise	FFA Chapter discusses and votes on project; discusses highlights and low points at completion.
7. Material Resources	Local phone company donates phones; school administration copies surveys.
8. Technical Support	State Extension community development specialist assists with project planning, questionnaire, obtaining the sample, interviewer training, data analysis and interpretation.
9. Celebration of Accomplishments	Article in local paper, FFA Chapter applies for state and/or national Chapter Award.
10. Plans for using information	FFA Chapter will utilize results to select future community development projects.
11. Students involved in follow-up to needs assessment.	Next year, FFA Chapter works on a survey-based project involving many of the same students.

and teachers, community leaders, and the Cooperative Extension Service also was an important part in successfully conducting the

community needs assessment survey. We learned from the project in Florida that school-based community needs assessments can maintain

"reasonable rigor" while keeping costs low and involving local leaders and students.

Opportunities abound for agricultural education programs and their respective FFA chapter if they choose to lead such an endeavor. This type of activity has the potential to increase community awareness about agricultural education and the FFA, garner additional administrative and community support, and publicize the program to other students and teachers and recruit additional students into the program. A needs assessment truly exemplifies the community based philosophy of a successful agricultural education program.

Experience shows that projects like this one can help youth develop a better understanding of their community. This can increase students' confidence that they can contribute to their community's efforts to solve local problems. We caution that these projects should not be viewed as meeting all the necessary conditions for creating involved citizens, but they are one step in the process. If leaders are going to build more sustained community development, they must take advantage of the opportunity to harness the energy and enthusiasm of youth.

Footnotes

1. Measurement accuracy and, hence, reliability and validity were enhanced by using question topics and formats from similar surveys, reviewing and testing survey questions and carefully training student interviewers (see Salant & Dillman, 1994). The review process by community leaders, students, and an Extension specialist with extensive survey experience established face validity of the measures and reduced errors from poor question wording, improper response categories and other common errors. Reliability was also enhanced by training students to follow the interview protocol

consistently and having adult facilitators provide feedback to help students correct deviations from the protocol.

2. The sample size was selected to yield data with a sampling error of ± 5 percent given a 95 percent confidence interval and $p=.5$. Directory sampling was used for this survey though random digit dialing could have been conducted (Lavrakas, 1987). Bias from coverage error and nonresponse was assessed during the data analysis by comparing the sample's frequency distributions for age, gender, and race with census data (see Salant & Dillman, 1994).

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