

# Don't Just Talk About Needs Assessment In Recreation Programming, Do It!

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## Abstract

Having successful recreation programs and satisfied participants can, in part, be attributed to the needs assessment step of recreation programming. Assessing participant needs, a required step of the recreation programming process, is difficult to illustrate in class because potential participants are not readily available to articulate their needs. As a result, many instructors simply introduce the topic and leave the more advanced concepts of needs assessment (e.g., survey design, sample selection, statistical analysis) to be covered in the evaluation or research course. This article demonstrates how implementing a “mock” needs assessment survey can help simulate a “big picture” understanding of it by students enrolled in a recreation programming class. End result is that students gain first-hand experience on how the process works by participating in a needs assessment survey, analyzing the data, and making programmatic recommendations for a future recreation program.

**KEYWORDS:** Needs assessment, recreation programming, survey

## Introduction

Soliciting participant input before implementing a recreation program, service, or event is an accepted step in the program planning process (Allan, 2000; Edginton, Hudson, Dier, & Edginton, 2004; "Recreation Program," 1953; Rossman & Schlatter, 2008). According to Henderson & Biaeschki, "assessment is the examination of some type of need that provides the foundation for further planning" (2002, p. 365). Assessing participant needs is typically conducted in one of four approaches: survey, interview/focus group, citizen advisory committee, or public meeting (Rossman & Schlatter, 2008). Surveys solicit opinions and ideas from community residents about the need for current and new recreation program offerings. Interviews/focus group meetings allow for in-depth discussion of specific program ideas through small group discussion. Sometimes new ideas for programs emerge through the findings of citizen advisory committees or from public meetings where citizens discuss planning issues or policy changes. The needs assessment approach selected for this learning activity is the survey. This article will illustrate how conducting a mock survey in class can help students gain a clear understanding of the survey approach to needs assessment.

Ideally, fundamental concepts associated with needs assessments are covered through an on-line quiz before this learning activity takes place. This step offers the instructor reasonable assurance that students are familiar with concepts such as need, want, interest, normative need, felt need, expressed need, comparative need, and intention (Rossman & Schlatter). Given this foundation, the learning activity may commence.

## Description of Learning Activity

Teaching the importance of needs assessment surveys, and conveying to students how they are done in recreation programming can be a daunting task because potential participants are typically not available to articulate their recreational needs. As a result, many instructors provide an overview of how needs assessments are done, but stop short of *doing* a needs assessment because it requires advanced knowledge and skills that many programming students do not currently possess. Such topics are often covered in a separate course on evaluation and research.

This article illustrates how to conduct a mock needs assessment survey in class by omitting the practicalities of survey item construction, survey delivery, and complex statistic analyses. It is safe to assume that most students have completed a survey of some sort during their lifetime. Students are told that the instructor wishes to survey the class to assess the need for an end-of-the-semester activity or event (see Figure 1.). Class members take several minutes to complete an eight-item survey that consists of two demographic questions and six Likert-type scale items asking them to indicate how likely they are to participate in different activities (pizza party, card tournament, etc.). Completed anonymous surveys are turned over and given to the instructor for shuffling and redistribution to students. Students are now holding a completed survey that is not their own. Two volunteers are asked to go to the white board to facilitate data summary from the surveys. One volunteer

**Needs Assessment Survey for Recreation Programming Class Members**

**Purpose:** To solicit input for an end-of-the-semester recreation program.

**Directions:** Please do not identify yourself. Answer each item below.

1. Circle your gender:      Male    |    Female
2. Circle your major:      Recreation Management    |    Therapeutic Recreation

**Directions:** For each activity listed below, circle how likely you are to participate.

3. Bowling at University Lanes	NOT LIKELY	SOMEWHAT LIKELY	VERY LIKELY
4. Card Tournament	NOT LIKELY	SOMEWHAT LIKELY	VERY LIKELY
5. Pizza Party	NOT LIKELY	SOMEWHAT LIKELY	VERY LIKELY
6. Picnic at a Park	NOT LIKELY	SOMEWHAT LIKELY	VERY LIKELY

*Thank you for your input! Please give this completed form to your instructor.*

**Figure 1:** Sample Needs Assessment Survey for Recreation Programming Class Members

is assigned the duty of counting responses by first asking the question “On the first item asking about gender, how many of you see male circled on your survey?” The *counter* sees how many hands are raised and announces the number to the second volunteer, the *recorder*, who writes the tally on the board. Meanwhile, students have been given a tally sheet created by the instructor whereby they concurrently keep track of the tallies (see Figure 2.). Counting accurately quickly becomes an issue if, for example, there are 30 people in the class yet the results only yielded a total of 28. A counting error has occurred and they must start again. In a short period of time, students have tallies and frequencies for each item.

At this instant, all resulting frequency data has been recorded on both the whiteboard and tally sheets. Conclusions may now be drawn. Discussion ensues on how to summarize data from each survey item. Students quickly learn to make accurate, yet basic statements such as: “Twenty out of 30 people in class responded that they were *very unlikely* to participate in a card tournament.” Or, “Twenty-five people were either *somewhat likely* or *very likely* to participate in a picnic.”

The final step in this activity requires all students to look at the aforementioned conclusions and make three recommendations about an end-of-the-semester activity or event. A possible recommendation may be that, based on the resulting frequency data, respondents indicated the greatest support for an end-of-the-semester a pizza party. Conversely, it may be recommended that, since there was little support for a card tournament, that cards should not be pursued. To summarize, by conducting a mock needs assessment survey whereby students

Needs Assessment Tally Sheet and Program Recommendations

**Directions:** Tally the number of responses for each needs assessment item. Then record the frequency or total in the box provided on the right side of the sheet.

	Tallies			Totals		
1. Gender	Male		Female	Male		Female
2. Major	Recreation Management		Therapeutic Recreation	Recreation Management		Therapeutic Recreation
	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely	Not Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely
3. Bowling						
4. Card Tournament						
5. Pizza Party						
6. Picnic at Park						

**Directions:** In the space below, write three (3) recommendations about an end-of-the-semester.

Figure 2: Tally Sheet Sample and Program Recommendations

complete a survey, analyze the data, and make recommendations, they can gain valuable knowledge on the usefulness and importance this required step of the program planning process.

Outcomes of the Learning Activity

There are several beneficial outcomes that emerge from conducting a mock needs assessment survey in a classroom setting. First, this activity is relevant because there are recreation and leisure agencies that still analyze surveys in this rudimentary manner due to variations in agency size, access to technology, or staff expertise. Depending on the type of agency students are hired to work with upon graduation, this basic approach to needs assessment may be the reality. Some agency’s still calculate survey data by hand despite board-driven efforts to encourage widely-available software programs such as Microsoft Excel. Other educational outcomes include a basic, yet working understanding of needs assessment surveys as well as a fundamental competency in making recommendations for future recreation programs based on needs assessment findings.

Recommendations for Using a “Mock” Needs Assessment

The needs assessment survey learning activity is recommended for use in two types of classes: (a) a recreation programming class and (b) an event planning class. Completing the activity in a recreation programming class exposes students to the big picture of why needs assessments play a key role in programming and how needs assessments are done. Similarly, it can also be adapted for use in an event

planning course to illustrate the importance of soliciting input from potential customers. One caveat is that this activity is not recommended for class sizes over 30 due to time constraints associated with compiling the survey frequency data. In summary, conducting a needs assessment survey in class and analyzing the results can provide students with a broad understanding of and hands-on experience in the needs assessment process.

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