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Evaluating Social Work Services and Programs

Robert W. Weinbach

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CHAPTER 7:
Needs Assessments
NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

When we hear the term program evaluation, we are most likely to think about an evaluation to see if a program was effective—an outcome evaluation. However, good program evaluation is an ongoing process. It starts when a program is only being considered, before a definite decision about actually implementing it is made—with a needs assessment.

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS FOR PROPOSED PROGRAMS

We are the only county in the state that doesn’t have this kind of program.

Everything about that program makes sense. Let’s do the same thing here.

The problem is growing every year. We need this program and we need it now.

It should be obvious why, even if correct, these statements are insufficient justifications for establishing a program. They suggest why programs that seemed promising have failed: they were based on impressions and assumptions, not on empirical evidence. They also suggest why needs assessments are so important to program success.

Ideally, no new program should be implemented without first conducting a needs assessment. However, as some authors note, that is often not the case. “Needs assessments (and the foundations they form) are often ignored in favor of ‘knee-jerk’ political agendas and reactions to emerging social crises.”¹ Some of the reasons for not conducting a needs assessment before offering a program have some legitimacy; they relate to time and cost. However, frequently someone just thinks a needs assessment is unnecessary; they believe (erroneously) that nothing would be learned from it.

As the term suggests, one reason for conducting a needs assessment for a proposed program is to find out if there is a need for such a program. However, that is only the beginning. In fact, most needs assessments determine rather quickly that a perceived problem is a real one and some program is needed to address it. The observations and judgments of professionals who proposed the program usually are confirmed. Once the need for a program has been established, then the real
work of the needs assessment begins: learning how the program should be
designed in order to maximize its potential for success. A needs assessment is a
planning tool; it “helps to plan a feasible, effectively targeted program.”

Only rarely are needs assessments conducted without at least a beginning
model of a program in mind. Often, a proposed program has already been
designed. However, even when the program model is fully developed and con-
tains considerable detail (as in instances when a program already offered else-
where is being proposed for another location or with another client population),
that program is never considered to be “set in stone.” Invariably, a needs assess-
ment suggests some needed changes, often to address the unique characteristics of
the clients the program will serve, the organization in which it will exist, and the
community in which it will be located.

Sometimes the findings of a needs assessment suggest that a proposed pro-
gram is needed and, with a few modifications, it could be effective. However,
examination of the data also reveals that the program cannot be offered. This hap-
pens most often because of budgetary or political concerns. For example, data may
suggest that to operate the proposed program effectively would be very expensive
and might thus create a negative impact on other valuable programs within the
organization. Or, perhaps the program might create too many enemies and harm
the overall image of the organization within the community. The ultimate decision
to offer a program is a complicated one that, as in other forms of program evalua-
tion, requires making sense of data drawn from many sources.

**Role of the Evaluator**

All evaluators of programs (even only proposed ones) function as researchers,
unlike single-system research in which the individual conducting the research
remains first and foremost a social work practitioner. However, any additional role
that an evaluator of a program assumes differs depending on what type of pro-
gram evaluation is being conducted.

Needs assessments are sometimes “contracted out” to outside researchers
who design and conduct them. However, they are more likely to be completed by
an organization staff member or a team already on the payroll. The evaluator
functions with what is described as **staff authority**. This means that he or she is
supposed to design the needs assessment, collect necessary data, make recom-
mandations about the program, and even attempt to convince the people who
requested the study what decision or decisions should be made. But the evalua-
tor’s authority stops there. Whoever requested the needs assessment has ultimate
authority to decide whether a program will exist, what form it will take, how it
will be implemented, and who will manage it.

There are many reasons why the recommendations of an evaluator might be
ignored or “overruled.” The decision to not go ahead with a recommended pro-
gram may be based on facts not known to the evaluator (for example, an adminis-
trator’s insights into funding, timing, or political issues). Conversely, the findings
of a needs assessment might produce clear evidence that a program is unnecessary or that, while needed, if implemented it might not be successful. Yet the program is implemented anyway, perhaps because the administrator is under political pressure to offer it. Fortunately, ignoring or overruling the findings and recommendations of a needs assessment does not happen too often. When it does, it can be demoralizing to the evaluator and gives the impression that the needs assessment was only a waste of time and resources.

While a good knowledge of research methods and statistical analysis is certainly helpful when conducting a needs assessment, it is less essential than, for example, in an outcome evaluation. What are important characteristics for people conducting needs assessments? Creativity, flexibility, interviewing skills, knowledge of social work practice, and knowledge of the community (and its power structure) where a proposed program might be implemented can be helpful. Having connections and personal friendships with those in the community and in related programs elsewhere would be additional assets.

Conducting a needs assessment also requires evaluators to have the ability to make changes in the research “as they go,” something that would be less important or even undesirable in other types of program evaluations. In a needs assessment, evaluators collect widely differing types of data, some planned and some unplanned. Some of it may be conflicting. Ultimately, the evaluator needs to step back and make sense of it all. Thus, the ability to organize and interpret data and to conceptualize what it all means, primarily by “pulling diverse sources and types of information together” is a very important quality for evaluators. In short, the role of the evaluator is that of a knowledgeable social worker who is also a good researcher/synthesizer.

Central Research Questions and Hypotheses

In a general sense, all research is about answering questions and testing hypotheses, verifying whether what we believe to be true is really true. Program evaluations are no exception; they attempt to answer many questions about a program. Much of the work of an evaluator is determining just which questions to ask.

In any type of program evaluation it is also possible to identify the central research questions and central hypothesis or hypotheses. In a needs assessment, research hypotheses usually are implicit rather than stated and tested directly.

In a needs assessment of a proposed program, the central research question is, Is the proposed program needed and, if so, what form should it take? The central research hypothesis may be, The proposed program is needed. If so, this would be considered a directional hypothesis, because it suggests that if the proposed program were implemented (the independent variable) there would be a reduction in the problem it would address (the dependent variable).

In a needs assessment, support for a central research hypothesis comes from many sources. Statistical analysis of data rarely entails the use of tests of statistical inference. Support for the hypothesis is much more likely to take the form of graphs, frequency distributions, and measures of central tendency and variability.
They are used primarily to describe, summarize, and communicate the most dramatic features of what was found. Occasionally, correlations between variables may be reported, if they provide insights into issues regarding a proposed or existing program. For example, it might be useful to report that, “Among the 100 potential clients surveyed, there was a fairly strong ($r = -.51$) negative correlation between age and amount of financial assistance required in order to participate in the program.”

**Specific Research Questions**

There are many, diverse research questions in a needs assessment for a proposed program. Some questions (such as those in Box 7.1) help to shape many needs assessments; others are unique and relate directly to the program under consideration.

The questions in Box 7.1 (and other similar ones) suggest the way that a needs assessment should be approached. Needs assessments can be characterized as both exploratory and descriptive. As in all good research, an open mind is required.

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**BOX 7.1

RESEARCH QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED IN NEEDS ASSESSMENTS FOR PROPOSED PROGRAMS**

- Is the problem a real one? What appear to be its causes?
- If the problem is real, how severe or widespread is it? Who appears to suffer most from it?
- How adequate are existing programs for addressing the problem?
- What additional services appear needed?
- Would the proposed program be able to offer the needed services?
- What would be reasonable objectives for the program?
- What would be the budgetary and staffing requirements of such a program?
- What additional sources of funding may be available?
- What organizations and individuals would be supportive of the program? Who would be opposed to it and why?
- How might the program’s existence affect other programs both inside and outside the organization?
- If offered, what potential clients should it target?
- What are potential referral sources for the program?
- How should the program be marketed in order to make it attractive to potential clients?
- What logistical obstacles to client participation exist? How could they be overcome?
- What would be a realistic time frame for implementing the program?
- What activities would have to be completed for the program to become operational?
- How and when should the program be evaluated?
Conducting a Needs Assessment

Every needs assessment is unique, just like every other type of program evaluation. However, planning and conducting needs assessments usually follow roughly the same steps. They are displayed in Box 7.2. Notice how many of the steps entail planning prior to actually collecting any data.

An Example: A Needs Assessment for a Proposed Program

While it is possible to describe various types of program evaluations in general terms, it may be helpful to get a little more concrete at this point. I will introduce an example of a program here, describe how a needs assessment of it might look, and continue with the same example in the next three chapters.

Here is the scenario. A private, not-for-profit family service agency currently offers both family counseling and private adoption services. During the past three years, there has been a decline in requests for adoption services. Furthermore, about twenty couples and other potential adoptive parents who were clients of the

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**BOX 7.2**

CONDUCTING A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

1. Determine and specify the general purpose of the research. What knowledge is sought and for what reason (usually to make some decision or decisions)?
2. Determine and specify the time parameters for the research. When will it begin and at what point must the findings be available for decision making?
3. Determine what additional resources and personnel will be available to conduct the research.
4. Specify the questions that the research will attempt to answer.
5. Determine what data will be required.
6. Determine how much of the needed data are available from secondary sources and how much will need to be collected as original data.
7. Identify the best sources for collection of new data and the best methods to collect them.
8. Estimate how long data collection for each method is likely to take.
9. Develop a timeline for data collection.
10. Determine what role each person will play in data collection.
11. Find or develop any needed data collection instruments.
12. Collect both secondary and original data.
13. Organize, analyze, synthesize, and interpret all available data.
14. Identify any gaps in data, and fill them if possible.
15. Summarize the research in report form and present and distribute it to those who will use it for decision making.
agency, and had been approved for adoption, terminated services because they became impatient while waiting for a child to become available. In a follow-up call, it was learned that twelve of the couples are now new parents. Their children were adopted from Russia, China, Romania, and South America. Following numerous phone conversations and e-mails with her colleagues who are directors of similar agencies around the country, the director concluded that an international adoption program might be a good thing. However, she recognized that to attempt to offer such a program without first conducting a needs assessment would be unwise. She assigned a team of three staff members to plan and conduct it, providing one day per week release time and a fairly generous budget to cover expenses. They were to explore the feasibility of developing an international adoption program and to come up with a recommendation as to whether such a program should be implemented. They were given four months to complete the research.

What follows is but one example of how the team might have tackled the job. It is meant to show how a needs assessment might be planned and conducted; it is not meant to suggest necessarily the best or the only way to do it.

**Identifying Needed Knowledge.** The first meeting of the team without the director present was essentially a brainstorming session. It relied on what team members already knew about international adoptions, both professionally and personally. Although they knew they would have to revise it over time, they began to compile (in no particular order) a long list of questions that they believed the needs assessment would have to answer in order for the director to make an informed decision. After sharing the list with the director, they added a few more at the next meeting, deleted some, and revised others. Ultimately, the list consisted of the following questions:

1. What other local organizations are already offering international adoption services? Is there a need for another international adoption program in the area? Are international adoptions on the increase, or on the decline?
2. How pleased are staff and administrators with existing programs? Would they support or resist another program in the area? How much help could they be expected to offer in getting a program established?
3. Would a program require the hiring of additional staff or could it be implemented with current personnel? Would it require specialized skills such as foreign language fluency or cultural competency not already existent within the agency?
4. Should such a program have international adoption “specialists” or should all adoption workers be involved in both international and domestic adoptions? What additional staff training costs might be involved?
5. What is the approximate total cost of adopting a child from a foreign country? How do costs vary by country? What is a typical fee paid to the adoption agency?
6. What resources (such as employee assistance plans) are available to assist parents in paying for the expense of an international adoption?
7. How large is the “pool” of potential adoptive parents who would be willing to pay the cost of an international adoption who are not already working with another organization?

8. What do parents who have adopted internationally see as the biggest hurdle to adoption? Would they do it again? Why or why not? Would they be willing to work with other potential parents to facilitate the process?

9. What are the state and federal licensing requirements for offering such a program? How much cost and time would be required to become licensed?

10. What international contacts would have to be established? Would they require travel and out-of-country time for agency staff on a regular basis?

11. How do current government immigration quotas limit the number of children available for adoption? Are quotas likely to increase or decrease within the current international political climate?

12. What initial start-up costs would be involved? At what point could the agency expect the international adoptions program to be financially self-supporting?

13. Is there an adequate supply of children available to meet the demand of potential adoptive parents?

14. What countries offer the most likely source of children? What requirements do they have—age of parents, marital status, health status, economic situation, and so forth—that might limit the number of potential adoptive parents? Which children are most frequently made available—boys, girls, babies, older children, special needs children?

15. In what counties are opportunities for adoption “opening up”? Where are they “shutting down” and why?

16. What is the usual length of time required for adoptive parents to complete their application, become approved, and receive their child? How does it vary from country to country? What travel requirements, if any, exist?

17. In what countries have unethical practices (for example, children being forcibly taken from their parents and “sold” for adoption, or bribery of local officials) been practiced in the past? How might this impact the reputation of the agency?

18. Do children adopted from some countries seem to have a more difficult time adjusting to North American culture than others? Why? What do parents need to provide to ensure that they grow up with a knowledge of and appreciation for their heritage? What services should the agency provide to assist parents in this task?

19. What are some common postadoptive problems that children and their families face and what services would need to be provided to address them? Would parents be likely to avail themselves of the services, if offered?

20. What venues should be used to “market” the program and what costs would be involved?

21. What is the general attitude of the community toward international adoptions?

22. Is there support for international adoptions among social workers and others working in adoptions in both the public and private sectors? Is there resentment, and if so, why?
23. How supportive would the agency’s own staff be of establishing such a program if they know all that it entails? What sources of resistance would likely be encountered?

Determining What to Do First. At their next meeting, relying on their knowledge as social workers and (to a lesser extent) on their knowledge of research methods, the team members tried to reach some consensus on how best to get the answers to their questions. Alongside each question, they listed several sources of data that could be used to answer it. Then they went back through their list and attempted to cut back on their potential data sources in order to stay within budget and time constraints, while still getting all the perspectives necessary to get a good answer. After revising their list, they decided on a number of “minimum” data requirements for answering each of their research questions. They are displayed in Box 7.3.

Working within Time Constraints. As they looked back over both their questions and how they tentatively planned to answer them, it became obvious to team members that some could be answered rather quickly and easily. Others would take more time, and would require data collection and synthesis from several sources. Some answers would be based on facts that could be compiled; others would necessarily be more subjective.

Given their time constraints, the team began setting up a timeline reflecting a tentative sequence of events. They went back over their list again, first identifying those questions that would take longer to answer and thus required that they begin the process of answering them as soon as possible. For example, measuring community support for the proposed program would require more time and observation and the use of several different venues. Others, it was decided, could wait, because getting an answer would be relatively simple. For example, a phone call to the state department of social services or a single personal interview at some later juncture could provide the needed information about state licensing requirements. In some instances, if an attempt to get the answer to a question were made too soon, the answer might change before the report of their findings was to be written. Because up-to-date answers are essential, there would be little value in seeking an answer to the question months earlier. For example, political upheavals or a health epidemic (such as the SARS virus outbreak in 2003) might affect whether international adoption was possible in a given country at any given time.

Once the team members had identified what they needed to know, how they would attempt to learn it, and had determined the general sequence of events for data collection, they had constructed a preliminary draft of their research design. In a needs assessment, that is generally enough to begin data collection. Almost certainly, the design would have to be revised, perhaps many times. For example, they might find some data or key people to be unavailable. They might uncover other unanticipated questions that require an answer and thus need to be added to their list. They might encounter some diametrically opposed perceptions held by key informants that would require the use of one or more additional data sources in order to learn which one is accurate. They might have to make any number of
BOX 7.3
EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS AND DATA SOURCES IN A NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR AN INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION PROGRAM

1. What other local organizations are already offering international adoption services? Is there a need for another international adoptions program in the area? Are international adoptions on the increase or on the decline?—Review of area agency directory of human service organizations, phone calls to key informants, confidential interviews with prospective parents who did not use existing programs, confidential interviews with select administrators, social indicators.

2. How pleased are staff and administrators with existing programs? Would they support or resist another program in the area? How much help could they be expected to offer in getting a program established?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, confidential interviews with administrators.

3. Would a program require the hiring of additional staff or could it be implemented with current personnel? Would it require specialized skills such as foreign language fluency or cultural competency not already existent with the agency?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, confidential interviews with administrators.

4. Should such a program have international adoption “specialists” or should all adoption workers be involved in both international and domestic adoptions? What additional staff training costs might be involved?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, confidential interviews with administrators.

5. What is the approximate cost of adopting a child from a foreign country? How do costs vary by country? What is a typical fee paid to the adoption agency?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, survey of parents who have completed foreign adoptions.

6. What resources such as employee assistance plans are available to assist parents in paying for the expenses of an international adoption?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, phone calls to personnel offices of major employers in the community.

7. How large is the “pool” of potential adoptive parents who would be willing to pay the cost of an international adoption who are not already working with another organization?—Review of agency adoption records, phone calls to key informants.

8. What do parents who have adopted internationally see as the biggest hurdle to adoption? Would they do it again? Why or why not? Would they be willing to work with other potential parents to facilitate the process?—Survey of parents who have completed foreign adoptions.

9. What are the state and federal licensing requirements for offering such a program? How much cost and time would be required to become licensed?—Telephone call or personal interview with person in charge of licensing adoption programs.

10. What international contacts would have to be established? Would they require travel and out-of-country time for agency staff on a regular basis?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs.

11. How would U.S. immigration quotas limit the number of children available for adoption? Are quotas likely to increase or decrease within the current political climate?—Review of Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS, formerly INS) policies on the Internet, confidential interviews with administrators.
12. What initial start-up costs would be involved? At what point could the agency expect the international adoptions program to be financially self-supporting?—Confidential interviews with administrators.

13. Is there an adequate supply of children available to meet the demand of potential adoptive parents?—Search of the professional literature, confidential interviews with administrators.

14. What countries offer the most likely source of children? What requirements do they have (age of parents, marital status, health status, economic situation) that might limit the number of potential adoptive parents? Which children are most frequently made available (boys, girls, babies, older children, special needs children)?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs.

15. In what counties are opportunities for adoption “opening up”? Where are they “shutting down” and why?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, Internet search of news services.

16. What is the usual length of time required for adoptive parents to complete their application, get approved, and receive their child? How does it vary from country to country? What travel requirements, if any, exist?—Survey of parents who have completed foreign adoptions, focus group of professionals in existing programs.

17. In what countries have unethical practices (for example, children being abducted from their parents and “sold” for adoption, or bribery of local officials) been practiced in the past? How might this impact the reputation of the agency?—Internet search of news services, confidential interviews with administrators.

18. Do children adopted from some countries seem to have a more difficult time adjusting to North American culture than others? Why? What do parents need to ensure that they grow up with a knowledge of and appreciation for their heritage? What services should the agency provide to assist parents in this task?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs.

19. What are some common postadoptive problems that children and their families face and what services would need to be provided to address them? Would parents be likely to avail themselves of the services, if offered?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, survey of parents who have completed foreign adoptions.

20. What venues should be used to “market” the program and what costs would be involved?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, confidential interviews with administrators, review of the professional literature.

21. What is the general attitude of the community toward international adoptions?—Focus group of professionals in existing programs, key informants, evaluator observations, confidential interviews with administrators.

22. Is there support for international adoptions among social workers and others working in adoptions in both the public and private sectors? Is there resentment, and why?—Review of the professional literature, focus group of public and private adoption workers.

23. How supportive would the agency’s own staff be of establishing such a program if they know all that it entails? What sources of resistance would likely be encountered?—Focus group of staff, confidential interviews with key staff members.
other adjustments as they went along. In a needs assessment, such changes are both inevitable and desirable. They should be made whenever indicated. After all, a needs assessment is not explanatory research. The evaluator is not concerned about, for example, the introduction of confounding variables. Changes in the design of a needs assessment will not damage the credibility of its findings; they will only enhance it.

Making Sense of It All. The team members had set a deadline for data collection—three weeks before the report was due. When the date arrived, they took what they had and evaluated it in relation to each of their questions. The data included notes from private interviews, literature reviews, and Internet searches, copies of e-mail messages, summaries of focus group discussions and conversations with key informants, and data collected from the survey that had been mailed to a sample of parents who had volunteered (in response to a newspaper advertisement) to complete a questionnaire about their experiences. Some knowledge gaps were still found; they had to be filled. Team members were able to do this through some follow-up phone calls and e-mails to people who had supplied data and by initiating a few new contacts. Then they divided up the work of writing a draft of their report. It was organized using the outline presented in Box 7.4.

BOX 7.4
A POSSIBLE OUTLINE FOR A REPORT OF A NEEDS ASSESSMENT (NEW PROGRAMS)

Executive Summary
I. The Background and Purpose of the Research
II. The Research Questions
III. Sources of Data and Methods of Data Collection
IV. Tentative Answers to the Research Questions
V. Conclusions: Why a Program Should (or Should Not) Be Implemented
VI. Proposal for a Program
   A. Staffing and Budget Requirements
   B. Implementation Procedures and Strategies
      1. List of Tasks to Be Completed
      2. Timeline for Completion
   C. Relationship to Other Programs
      1. Within the Agency
      2. Within the Community
   D. Evaluation*
      1. Formative Evaluation Timetable
      2. Outcome Evaluation Timetable
Appendices

*Outside consultation may be required.
The report contained a brief executive summary prior to the body of the report. It was a three-paragraph abstract of the full report. The body of the report contained some data (such as annual international adoption figures and the number of children housed in orphanages and awaiting adoption). They were presented in brief tabular form. Longer tables, the results of some statistical analyses (reflecting associations or correlations between variables measured in the adoptive parents survey), and narrative summaries of focus group discussions were included as appendices. Much of the first part of the body of the report was written in narrative form. However, because the team was recommending that an international adoptions program should be implemented, it also included a proposal for a program as part VI (Box 7.4). That part of the report relied more on numbers and figures (for example, it included a proposed budget and a timeline for program development).

The draft of the report was presented to the director one week prior to its due date. She reviewed it and made numerous comments and asked questions in the margins, primarily in relation to statements that were unclear or where conclusions did not seem to follow from the data presented. Then the team met for the last time and made the necessary revisions to the report. One member did a final “edit” to ensure that it was written in a consistent style, and then it was submitted. The director later shared the report with her board of directors for their reactions and input.

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS OF EXISTING PROGRAMS

We conducted an extensive needs assessment for this program before it was implemented ten years ago, and the problem certainly has not gone away.

The program is well-known and has been nationally recognized.

The program clearly has outlived its usefulness. It is expensive to operate and needs to be shut down.

Statements like these, spoken with a voice of authority, have sometimes been the impetus for making decisions about the future of existing social programs. For example, they have been used to justify making no changes in a program, or to simply eliminate a program with only the flimsiest of evidence. Too often, the decision was the wrong one. A needs assessment might have prevented a costly error.

Indicators That a Needs Assessment May Be Appropriate

A needs assessment can be useful at most any time in the life cycle of an existing program, but it is most likely to be used when someone (often someone in a position of influence) has questioned the continuing need for the program, at least in its current form. Needs assessments can inject some objectivity into decisions about the future of the program.

Needs assessments of existing programs are most likely to occur when certain warning signs have appeared. How can we tell that a needs assessment of an
existing program might be informative? Perhaps fewer clients are taking advantage of a program, or the program does not seem to be serving the people it was intended to serve. Perhaps staff morale is low and/or staff members complain that the program no longer seems to be as effective as it once was. Or, resistance to the program in the community seems to be growing. A needs assessment could help us to learn what is happening or has happened and would help us to decide what to do about it.

Changes That Occur

If a program was needed and effective in the first place, it should continue to be needed and relevant, unless some important change has occurred. More often than not, when warning signs are present, that is exactly what has happened. What kind of changes may cause us to question the continuing need for a program, at least in its present form, and thus precipitate a needs assessment? I will mention only a few of many possible examples. They frequently are interrelated, that is, a change in one area often leads to changes in one or more of the others.

Changes in the Community. The community in which the program exists may appear to have changed in some important way. A program, for example, an appropriate one for families with young children, may no longer be needed as residents of the neighborhood have “gentrified.” Or, it may have targeted homemakers in one-wage-earner families, but both parents in many families are now fully employed. Or, it may have addressed the problems of low-income families, but the neighborhood has become fashionable again and more affluent people have moved back. In short, it may be a good program, but not what the community needs or wants.

Changes in “the Competition.” In business, competition is always a threat. It threatens the very existence of a business. The presence of other programs seeking to address the same problem is usually not a threat to a human service agency in the same way that it is in the corporate sphere. However, increased or decreased “competition” from other organizations and programs with similar goals and serving the same client base can impact a program and thus can be an indication that a needs assessment would be useful. When new programs and services appear, a central research question might be, Should our program be modified to avoid duplication of services? Or, Can we now safely scale back our program and find a better use for the resources that will thus be conserved?

When other programs and services disappear or are cut back, the central question would be different. It might be, How much do we need to expand in order to fill the void left by the other programs? Or, it might be, Which of the services that are no longer available could be subsumed by our program within its mission, and which should be left for other programs to offer?

Any changes in the competition might suggest the advisability of a needs assessment. Even if the amount of competition remains about the same, other pro-
grams may change their focus, for example, from a focus on treatment to one of prevention. In this case a needs assessment might indicate whether a program should and can make similar changes and, if so, how should they be accomplished. Or, if they are not perceived as desirable, what changes in the current program still should be made to help the program to interface with the other, modified programs.

Changes in Understanding of the Problem. As other, more traditional research studies are conducted, we learn more about a problem—especially its manifestations and origins. Sometimes, what is learned causes us to "re-think" a program and to try to find out if it is still appropriate, given what we now know about the problem. The mental health field provides some very good examples of how this can occur. Based on medical research during the late twentieth century, we now understand many forms of mental illness in a very different way than we did twenty or thirty years ago. As more diagnoses are found to have genetic and chemical origins, many mental health programs (especially those with a strong psychoanalytical treatment philosophy) have had to undergo major revisions or have been terminated altogether. Services now include far less emphasis on traditional "talk therapy," and focus instead on helping patients maintain their health through medication compliance. Our perception of the optimal "treatment relationship" with clients has been modified along with the nature of services offered. Those programs that have successfully made the transition have frequently employed needs assessments prior to making changes, much as they would have had the old program never existed. Some very basic questions have been addressed, for example, Is there still a need for our program? and, If so, what changes must be made to make it more relevant to the problem as we now understand it?

Changes in Intervention "Technology." Intervention technology is not the same as information technology and does not relate (at least not directly) to computers. It is our knowledge of the best way to treat a problem. Sometimes our understanding of a problem and what causes it changes little over time, but we learn what interventions are (or are not) effective in addressing it. This is most likely to occur following one or (more likely) several program outcome evaluations that have either (1) demonstrated the effectiveness of services very different from ours, or (2) demonstrated the ineffectiveness of services like ours for addressing a problem. Then, a needs assessment can help us to address such central questions as, If we offer the service that has proven most effective, will clients be receptive to it? Or, Should the new service be offered along with the old one or in place of it?

Sometimes changes in what is considered to be "state-of-the-art" intervention technology are imposed on us rather than something we learn from experience or even believe to be desirable. A program may need to conduct a needs assessment to learn how much it needs to change in order to continue to remain credible or continue to receive financial reimbursement based on current beliefs and policies regarding "what works best." For example, during the last few years of the twentieth century, welfare reform and the replacement of the old AFDC
program with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) created a new “prescribed” intervention for the problem of financial dependency. It changed from cash assistance to provision of certain time-limited services as child care, and job training and education—services designed to help clients locate and get good paying jobs. By 2003, over half of federal welfare spending was no longer going to provide cash to needy families. It was going for the other services instead. Programs in the public sector and those in the for-profit or not-for-profit sectors who depended on contracts with the public sector for payment for their services could have benefited from a needs assessment designed to learn how to make their programs more responsive to this development and to avoid the loss of federal reimbursement.

Changes in Funding. If a program receives a large funding cut, a needs assessment can help to determine what services can be eliminated or scaled back while doing the least damage to the program and its chances for achieving its objectives. In the less common scenario in which funding increases, a needs assessment can help to answer the central question, What would be the most productive use of the increased funding for increasing the likelihood that the program will achieve its objectives?

A related situation that may suggest the advisability of a needs assessment is changes in reimbursement for services. Some programs depend heavily on contracts for outside reimbursement for services, for example, through a contract with the local department of social services to provide a certain number of “billable hours of service” or to serve a certain number of clients. Any changes in the formula for reimbursement by the contracting agency can represent a major threat to the funding of the program. When these changes occur, decisions must be made regarding such important program issues as who can continue to be served or what services can continue to be offered, given the amount of funding that the program must have to survive. Such decisions can be made most equitably and with the least disruption to the program with data from a needs assessment.

In programs that depend on third-party reimbursements from HMOs or other health insurance providers such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield, any major changes in reimbursement policies can suggest the need for a needs assessment. In the 1990s, efforts at cost containment resulted in changes that virtually eliminated reimbursement for long-term mental health counseling or long-term evaluation of mental illness. A greater emphasis on brief evaluation, crisis intervention, and outpatient services has meant that many programs offering more traditional, long-term health services needed to evaluate whether they were still needed (and could remain financially solvent) or what changes in their services were required for them to continue.

Changes in Mandates. A mandate may come in many forms, but they all represent a requirement that a program must meet. They may originate in some branch of the federal, state, or local government. They may take the form of laws, amend-
ments, executive orders, or some other carefully worded statement that, for example, dictates hiring practices, working conditions, methods for protection of client confidentiality (such as HIPAA), and so forth. Or, they may be simply the requirements of a private foundation (often reflecting its mission and the values of the individual or group that donated money to establish it) that provides funding for a program.

If a program is receiving outside funding, it must comply with certain mandates and requirements. If they change, the program must adapt or risk losing its funding. The best way to learn how to adapt is often by conducting a needs assessment. When this occurs, often the central research question is, How can we make the necessary changes to be in compliance with the new mandate while not jeopardizing the program’s potential for achieving its objectives?

**Role of the Evaluator**

The role of the evaluator in a needs assessment of an existing program is essentially the same as in a needs assessment of a proposed program—a researcher. The evaluator can be an outsider, or someone employed within the program or the larger organization. Whichever is the case, his or her role is to use whatever data sources and methods are necessary to learn if the program is still needed and, if so, what changes are indicated.

**Central Research Questions and Hypotheses**

In a needs assessment designed to evaluate an existing program, the central research question would be, Is the program still needed and, if so, does it need to be modified? Of course, if it is concluded early in the course of a needs assessment that a program is no longer needed (a rarity), a second central research question might be, What would be the best way to phase out the program?

The implicit hypothesis in a needs assessment of an existing program would usually be, The program is still needed in some form. However, in less common situations in which evidence has accumulated that the program may have become obsolete or unnecessary, the implicit research hypothesis might be, The program is no longer needed. Thus, it would be predicted that the program and the incidence of the problem are no longer related.

**Specific Research Questions**

The specific research questions in the needs assessment for an existing program relate directly to the changes that are perceived to have occurred. They are designed to determine if they are real, and if so, how they may have affected the need for the current program. If it appears that the program is still needed but requires revision, questions will relate to the appropriateness of any revisions that are being considered and how successful they might be.
General Characteristics

Needs assessments of existing programs share many of the same characteristics as needs assessments conducted of programs that are only being considered. For example, they use a wide range of methods of data collection and rely heavily on the evaluator to make sense out of data that take many forms. Conclusions are necessarily subjective and take the form of recommendations, rather than definitive answers.

There are also some notable differences. A needs assessment of an existing program tends to be more narrowly focused and is thus generally smaller in scope. Funding to conduct it often must be drawn from the existing program budget. The program is unlikely to have the luxury of being able to grant released time to one or more staff members to conduct it. Because it is most likely to be conducted in response to some change that has occurred (such as those just mentioned), answers are often sought to only one or a few specific questions directly related to that change. They will influence decisions that sometimes (as in the case of changes in funding or in mandates) must be made almost immediately. The decisions cannot be postponed pending more data collection, because the financial stability of the program, jobs of its staff members, or the well-being of its clients is often at stake.

A program that has been in existence for a while has “learned” over time. In some instances, its staff members have confirmed what was suggested by an earlier needs assessment; in others, they have found it to be incorrect. A good program manager takes note of what has been learned and already has made necessary adjustments as the program matured. So, by the time a subsequent needs assessment is conducted in response to some change, much of what was unknown prior to the program’s implementation (for example, the demographic characteristics of its clients, attitudes of community leaders toward the program, staffing needs, budget needs) is now known. There is no need to assess these “contextual variables” again, unless there is reason to believe that the change that has occurred has somehow affected them. That makes it possible to devote limited time and energies to addressing the central research question or questions.

Reports of needs assessments conducted on existing programs tend to be shorter and more “to the point” than those of programs only in the planning stage. Sometimes they consist of simply a series of research questions and their respective answers, with documentation for the answers presented in response to each question (or included as appendices). The documentation is likely to consist of a mixture of descriptive statistics, quotations from key informants, and narrative summaries of focus groups or community forums.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Whether conducted in relation to a proposed program or an existing one, needs assessments are performed to improve decision making. They can help us to avoid costly mistakes and the inefficient use of limited resources.
There is no one best way to conduct a needs assessment. Each is designed as a unique entity, relying heavily on common sense, our knowledge of practice, and our knowledge of research. The example of the needs assessment for a proposed international adoption program reflects my ideas, experiences, and preferences for getting the job done, but is in no way an exemplar of the right way to do it. I would be surprised if readers did not find fault with something I proposed and did not think there would be a better way to accomplish it. Such a difference of opinion is only natural, and is one reason why needs assessments often are conducted by a team or committee rather than an individual. Often, someone else really does have a better idea.

Needs assessments, as was noted, are exploratory and descriptive in nature. A design for a needs assessment is supposed to be flexible—more flexible than in, for example, an outcome evaluation. Changes during the process of data collection invariably occur, and that is OK. In a needs assessment, the evaluator is only trying to obtain the most accurate picture possible. The best way to do that is often unclear until the data collection is already underway.

Unlike some other types of program evaluation, the evaluator in a needs assessment is not greatly concerned about introducing confounding variables or threats to internal validity. The findings of all needs assessments are necessarily subjective and are assumed to contain some degree of measurement error.

Needs assessments often draw much of their data from confidential interviews, focus groups, or key informants. The people in these groups cannot be considered a random sample, as they contain “some conscious or unconscious bias.”6 The groups are comprised using what can best be described as purposive sampling, since they are designed to select “unique cases that are especially informative.”7 Members are chosen because it is assumed that they possess some knowledge or insights that can be helpful in making a decision about the program. Diversity of opinion is often desirable, often at the expense of sample representativeness. Thus, needs assessments are, at best, a good estimate of reality. They produce better, more informed decisions, decisions based on more than simply what appears logical or what common sense suggests. However, no one could ever claim that they will ensure that a decision based on a needs assessment will always be the correct one. Only time can tell us that.

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**KEY TERMS**

- staff authority
- researcher/synthesizer
- executive summary
- intervention technology
- mandate

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What is the role of the evaluator in a needs assessment? How does it differ from the usual role of a researcher?
2. What are some personal attributes that are desirable for a person conducting a needs assessment?

3. What do we hope to accomplish from conducting a needs assessment of a proposed program?

4. What are some reasons why an administrator might decide not to implement a program that a needs assessment has identified as needed?

5. What are some of the most common sources of data in needs assessments? Why do they produce what can be described as just an “estimate of reality”?

6. In what ways does the report of a needs assessment differ from the usual format of a research report?

7. What are some indicators that it might be desirable to conduct a needs assessment of an existing program?

8. What are some recent changes in intervention technology (our knowledge of the best way to treat a problem) that might cause us to question the need for an existing program in its current form?

9. What are some recent changes in state and federal mandates that might suggest that a needs assessment of an existing program in your area should be conducted? Explain.

10. What are some of the major ways in which a needs assessment of a proposed program differs from a needs assessment of an existing one?

REFERENCES

2. Ibid.