How to Listen to Your Community Part 2:

Conducting Interviews and Focus Groups to Gather Data for Needs Assessment and Advocacy

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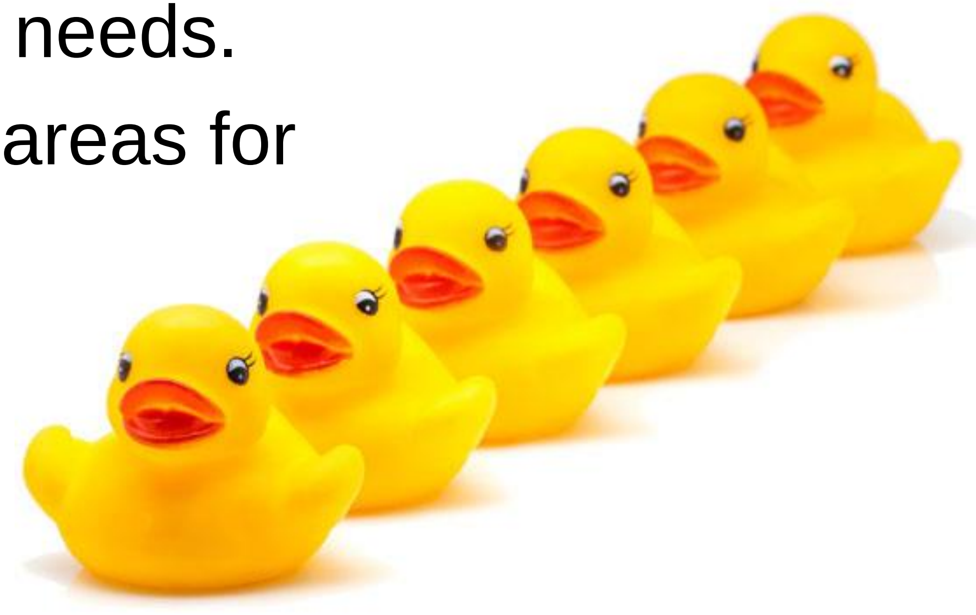
Agenda

- Review Part 1: Planning & Surveys
- Types of qualitative data collection
- Interviewing and leading focus groups
- Analyzing and interpreting qualitative data

Why listen?

- Align library resources and services to community needs.
- Give voice to community members who you might not hear from at the library.
- Show your commitment to being responsive to emerging needs.
- Discover strengths and areas for improvement.



Another reason (if you need it)

- Edge has a whole strategic area that is mostly concerned with community assessment and evaluation (Benchmarks 4-6).
- Indicator 4.2 & 4.3 are almost entirely about needs assessment.
- Others can be more easily accomplished once you have needs assessment data in hand.

Librarians are researchers

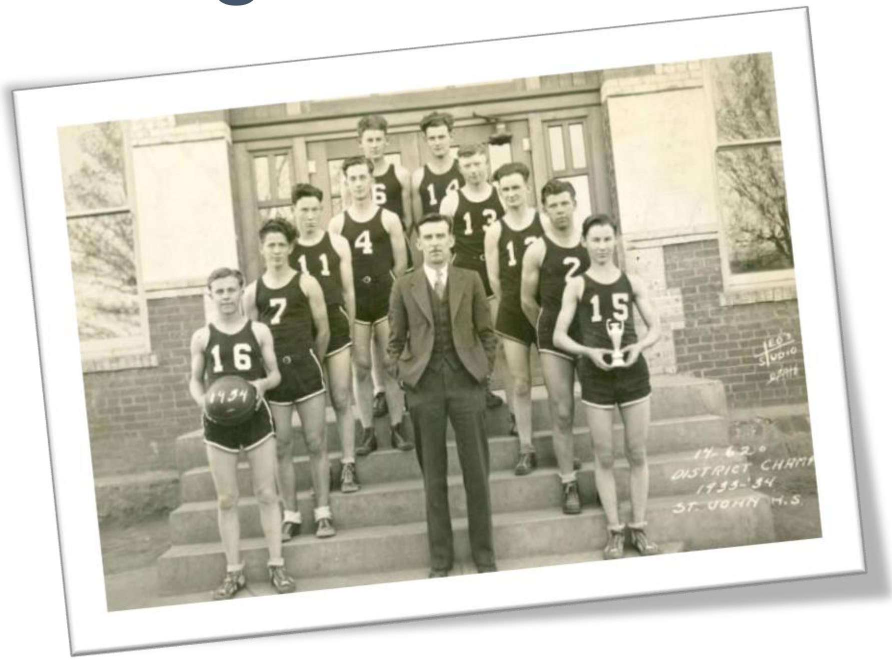
Community needs assessments and evaluations are forms of research.

- You have questions that data can help answer:
  - Are we offering the right services?
  - Should we start this new initiative?
  - Did patrons achieve what we hoped they would?
  - Are patrons getting what they want?
  - Do we have sufficient support from community leaders?

Get ready to go!

Planning your listening campaign is more important than anything else.

1. Assemble your working team



- ✓ Library managers
- ✓ Library board/friends
- ✓ Local government staff
- ✓ Peer agency staff
- ✓ Patrons

People who can help you:

- Understand the needs of your community
- Understand expectations in your political environment
- Connect with underserved communities
- Roll up their sleeves and do the work

2. Gather existing data into a community profile

What existing data can tell you:

- Who lives in your service area
- What kinds of lives they lead
- What they might need
- How patrons are using the library

Data sources:

- Census/ACS
- Broadband USA
- Community indicators
- City/county surveys
- Education agency
- Employment agency
- Library records
- Media
- Public records
- Other research

3. Figure out what else you need to know

About your community:

- What are the most important issues facing your community?
- What do your community members need in order to be successful?
- What kind of community do you aspire to be?
- How is the library perceived by the community?

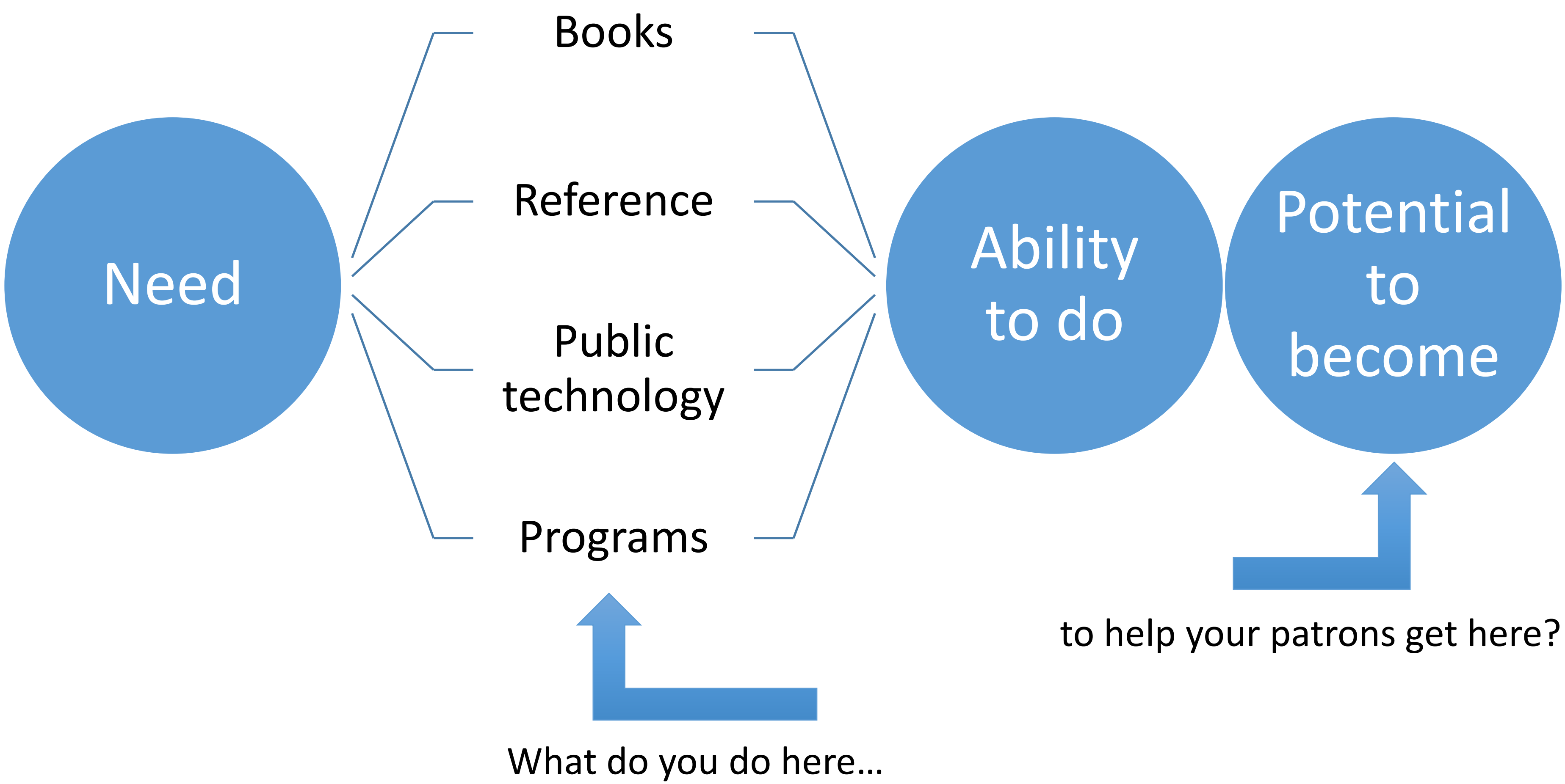
About the library:

- How does the library support community goals?
- How does the library support patrons?
- How does the library support other organizations?
- What information would help you make decisions about programs to support community goals?

About your patrons:

- Who are we serving? Where?
- What are their biggest needs? Why?
- Do our programs help them? How?
- Do they value the library in the ways we expect?

Theory of change: Having, Knowing, Doing



<u>And</u> why/how do you think it helps?

Data collection methods

Choosing the right method for your information needs

The voices approach

The goal is to hear from a variety of voices who can:

- Confirm/refute your theory of change
- Provide a more nuanced understanding of how your services affect change in your patrons and community
- Create a shared vision and solutions to community problems
- (and while you're there, get some good data for advocacy)

Primary types of data and collection

Quantitative

- Get at the “what”
  - Descriptive data about your population
  - Programmatic data (counts, analytics)
  - Survey data
- Often used in summative evaluation & formal reports

Qualitative

- Get at the “how” and “why” of outcomes
  - Interviews
  - Focus groups
  - Survey data (open-ended questions)
  - Observations
- Often used in formative evaluation & for storytelling

Considerations

- Capacity (people & money)
- Availability of expertise
- Scale of the respondent pool
- Community/key stakeholder acceptability
  - What are other departments in your municipality doing?
  - What is the expectation for rigor?

Qualitative data collection

Where to start with listening live

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Qualitative: data about your theory of change

- What have your patrons learned or done as a result of your services?
  - What can they do now that they couldn’t do before?
  - How have their lives have changed?
  - What they plan to do next?
- What do you need to know whether your programs are effective?
  - How did your program contribute to improvement?
  - What else do they want to learn or do?
  - What is their definition of success?

Interviews/focus groups

- When to use
  - During design and implementation
  - Testing theory of change
  - Developing indicators
  - Gathering impact data
  - Developing/testing survey questions

One-on-one interviews

"A conversation with a purpose."

--L.A. Dexter (1970) *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*

- Useful for sensitive topics or when potential respondents may be less likely to participate fully with others present
  - Particularly true with groups with peers who interact regularly
- Need to be respectful of intimacy
- Easier to maintain some structure, keep discourse on track

Focus groups

- Good for less pressured/sensitive discussions
- Allows for more interviews in shorter period of time
- Stimulates linking/surfacing of experiences and ideas
- Requires group management skills
- Better to have too many than too few participants

Types of interviews/focus groups

- Structured: when you know the relevant questions
  - Leader in control
  - Pre-determined questions
  - Systematic/everyone gives a response
- Semi-structured: when you want to probe for more information
  - Leader provides questions from guide, but phrasing may vary
  - Respondents may touch on related issues, digress, and expand
- Deliberative dialogue/unstructured: when you want to understand complexities, perceptions, experiences
  - Leader introduces a topic and provide background
  - Conversational/follow-up probes developed during interview
  - Respondents engage in discussion with each other (focus groups)

Getting started

Planning ahead and practicing

Best practices

- Understand your ethical obligations
  - Respect your subjects
  - Pay special attention to vulnerable populations
  - Don’t ask more than you need to know
  - Don’t put potential subjects in a position where they can’t say no to participating
- Have a plan & a purpose
  - Identify what kind of data you need
  - Have interview guides
- Collect for quality, not quantity
  - Test your instruments
  - Train your interviewers
  - Practice role playing
  - Be consistent and timely

Conducting interviews and focus groups

1. **Fear not!**
2. **Have a plan**
3. **Practice**
4. **Engage**
5. **Ask for outcomes**
6. **Give space**
7. **Follow along**
8. **Drill down**
9. **Wrap up**
10. **Reconnect**

1. Fear not! You can do this.

- Your patrons and your community want to tell you what they think and will appreciate the opportunity to talk to you.
- You will learn a lot and probably enjoy doing it.
- Search YouTube for “research interview” or “research focus group” and watch different techniques.
- While it’s usually preferable to have fresh faces conducting interviews and leading focus groups, you can still do this with limited staff.

2. Have a plan

- Prepare interview guides well in advance to help you focus on the information you need.
- Limit your main questions to 10-12.
- Ask some wondering questions (If you could…)
- Make appointments, arrange for child care if appropriate.
- Find a physically comfortable, quiet location. In subjects' homes can be very effective for interviews.
- Have note takers for focus groups. Record interviews and focus groups.

3. Practice, practice, practice

- Read your interview questions out loud, to your cat, in your shower, to your friends and co-workers. Make sure they sound and feel like natural conversation.
- Work on appearing neutral and interested in your body language and reactions to the information provided.
- Practice note taking too. It can be hard to listen, question, and take notes at the same time.
- Make a list of follow-up questions based on your practice sessions

4. Engage

- Let you subjects know why you’re doing interviews/focus groups, what you would like to learn, and what you will be doing with the information.
- Let them know any conditions of their participation (rewards, confidentiality, public use).
- Be yourself, friendly, open.
- Warm up your subjects. Start with easy, minimally personal short-answer questions (not yes/no).
- Avoid leading questions that might influence responses
  - Don’t: Do you think the library is a warm and inviting place?
  - Do: How do you feel about the library’s physical environment?

5. Ask for outcomes

- Find out if the library has helped them know/be/do something important in their lives and how.
- Ask about how/whether it also helped friends, family, and/or community.
- Treat personal stories as precious; be appreciative they are sharing with you.

6. Give space

- Use silence strategically to help respondents reflect on their answers and further explain.
- Don’t rush answers.
- Be careful about body language—there’s a sometimes fine line between nodding as encouragement to continue and nodding as encouraging wrapping up.
- Seek clarifications to elicit further reflection and responses.

7. Follow along

- Often the most difficult part.
- Need to maintain engagement with the subject, while also planning next questions.
- Having a note taker and recorder helps let you maintain focus on the subject.

8. Drill down

- Jot down notes to yourself for follow-up questions.
- Take a pause to reflect on what else you need to ask.
- Echo response and then ask for more.
- Be careful about getting side tracked.
- Limit yourself to a maximum of 3 follow-up questions.

9. Wrap-up

- Give the subject an opportunity to add unstructured comments.
- Express appreciation.
- Remind them how their information will be used.
- Restate any conditions you’ve agreed to (e.g., confidentiality, use of responses in advocacy materials).
- Express appreciation again.

10. Re-connect

- If appropriate, follow-up with subjects to let them know the outcomes from your inquiry.

Using qualitative data

Interpreting your results beyond anecdotes

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Organizing your data

- Write up your notes and observations from interviews/focus groups <u>immediately</u> after the session.
- Transcribe tapes.
- Put together guides, transcriptions, and notes into a notebook.
- Read your materials over several times.

Coding and theming

- Write short descriptions of emerging themes or patterns and note where they appear in transcripts or notes.
- Note deviations from common themes.
- Note external influences on attitudes or behaviors and link to themes.
  - E.g., Having children is associated with greater diversity of outcomes across domains.
- Highlight interesting or illustrative stories.

Write up results

- Note your evaluation questions, methods, and processes.
- Summarize each case—write a narrative of the interview or subject in terms of your interview questions and follow-up questions.
- Identify cases that share similar themes and explain the conditions subjects revealing the same themes were similar or different.
- Explain how the results have answered your evaluation questions.
- Explain any action or follow-up you will take as a result

Questions?

Thank you!

More information:

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libraryedge.org