



Community Assessments: Three Examples of Asset- Oriented Assessment Tools

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Community assessments are tools that allow Extension educators and their community partners to gather and analyze information about their community—typically to determine the current condition, or state, of a particular aspect of the community. While there are different modes of assessment, they are generally most useful when they capture the diversity of the community. Depending on the issue(s) being assessed, the community assessment may want to capture individuals representing the age and ethnic diversity of the community – including children; or the assessment may need to capture the diversity of households in a community: families with children, singles, multi-generational households, couples without children, couples with grown children. In addition, the assessment may be focused on a particular program, such that clients, providers, program administrators and non-participants may be needed to be effective. The broader the community assessment, the more inclusive, diverse and multi-dimensional those participating in the assessment need to be.

Community assessments are often conducted to collect data that affects how programs get implemented. More specifically, they can:

- Gauge public opinion, rather than rely on the opinion of a few key leaders, local gossip or stereotypes;
- Increasing awareness of a particular issue;
- Create an opportunity for community input and/or ownership of the process;
- Be required to satisfy a grant or program.

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Regardless of the reason for conducting the assessment, it can be a powerful tool for moving an issue forward in your community.

There are different modes of assessment, and the mode chosen should take into consideration three factors:

- the time available for the assessment,
- information needed from the assessment, and
- the diversity to be captured by those participating in the assessment.

Three simple assessment modes are described that require little prior knowledge by the participants: asset walks, asset quilts, and a survey. There are other means of community assessment, such as personal interviews, focus groups, public forums, or nominal (informal) group processes. Numerous resources are available about implementing these modes; for example, Rotary International has a publication titled, “Community Assessment Tools” that describes, provides instructions, and gives examples for eight different modes (see http://www.rotary.org/RIdocuments/en_pdf/605c_en.pdf).

Asset Walks

- a. **Applicable context:** This technique works well with a large or small number of people (people can be divided into smaller groups if necessary, see below), and it can be part of a larger program/event, if time allows.
- b. **Description:** Simply WALK (this is key!) your group through your community. Throughout the walk, ask those with you to write down and/or talk about what they observe – it could be vacant lots, buildings, businesses, people, etc. (Walking is key because it is slow, and it allows the group to change its composition during the walk – people get into conversations with one another, change who they walk beside, etc.). The ideas are transcribed into a single list after the walk is completed. (In today's era, there are additional ways to capture the observations: record conversations on iPhones/voice recorders for transcription; have people take pictures of what they observe, annotate them, and email/text them; or simply with paper, clipboards and pencils.)
- c. **Time requirement:** It may take one to two hours to walk through a neighborhood, or require multiple walks to get a complete assessment of the entire community (e.g., downtown one day, industrial district another, various neighborhoods, newer retail centers/neighborhoods, etc.). It can take another few hours to transcribe notes and assemble photographs into a meaningful format that can be shared with others (see “e” below).
- d. **Information gathered:** This technique is most effective when the assessment concerns land use (e.g., identifying opportunities in your community that require space), or other physical/natural assets. Asset walks also can be used to identify the kinds of businesses or organizations in a community (e.g., the opportunities for personal interaction). Sometimes this is a great conversation starter for a group, organization or community: this technique can be used to simply get people to talk with one another, and from this, they are able to identify areas of common interest to pursue more deeply. Observations tend to be diverse and very detailed.
- e. **Participation diversity:** You can have as many people participate in this assessment as you like; in fact, sometimes it is really interesting to break a large group (more than eight) into smaller groups and have them start at different points in the community. Even though the groups will be walking the same streets, their perspectives will be different. This is also a great activity if a larger project needs to engage people across socio-economic classes, as it can encourage people to interact (if groups are mixed appropriately).
- f. **Drawing conclusions from the assessment:** Once the observations are collected from those participating in the walk, evaluate the observations. First, simply tally the number of times a particular theme, observation, specific asset, or idea is made as the observations and comments are reviewed. This will help identify the most important themes, assets and ideas to pursue within a program/project. Second, link comments across themes, assets and ideas. That is, associate themes with particular assets and ideas to begin to develop plans for moving forward with issues or projects. (This second step corresponds to the quilting component of the “Asset Quilting” exercise below, and it can be done in a group context by presenting your tally of themes, assets, and ideas to the group and have them make connections between them.)

Asset Quilting

- a. **Applicable context:** This technique works well with six to 30 people, particularly with as diverse a group as possible. It is an ideal exercise/hands-on activity for a meeting or workshop that involves creative thinking and/or planning. Since participants will be working in smaller groups, do not have too many small groups so you can listen in on each group's discussion and help them along, if necessary.
- b. **Description:** Prior to conducting this exercise, determine the categories of assets to be identified that are related to the issue/project that is motivating the assessment. (See Appendix A for a list and description of asset categories.) At the event, hand out index cards (3” x 5” work well) and pencils to participants, making sure each participant has enough cards as assets to identify. Have participants identify specific community assets on index cards (one asset per card). [Rather than give the participants a list of assets, announce the assets orally and have them write one down at a time.] Then have three to five of the participants work to make a ‘quilt’ of the cards – the idea is for the participants to strategically or creatively connect all of the assets to generate new project ideas, new perspectives on their community, etc. (More than six groups becomes unmanageable.)
- c. **Time requirement:** Give people a short time to identify their assets, maybe 30 seconds between each one. This forces them to write down the 1st thing that comes to mind, and this helps to identify some unique assets. Allow about 30 minutes for quilt development: five to ten minutes for the individuals to share the assets they identified, and the remainder to identify any points of connection among the collection of assets and weave a story about those connections.
- d. **Information gathered:** This exercise is great for simply identifying assets in a community. Tailor the types of assets the participants identify to the issue you want to assess; however, try to have people identify a personal talent – it makes sure there are assets that may not “fit” with the others, and makes the exercise more interesting. It is also great for getting the group to think differently about the community, since they will probably not be working with the “usual” assets. Lastly, the quilt outcome (and logic behind it; the “story”) could easily be translated into an action plan, if that is needed.
- e. **Participation diversity:** Diversity among the participants is inherently limited by the size of the group. To the extent that diversity does exist among participants, you can either spread the diversity across groups, in which case you might get similar ‘quilts’ from the exercise; or, you can have all the groups be homogeneous, so there will be diverse quilts across groups.
- f. **Drawing conclusions from the assessment:** The first major outcome of this exercise is the identification of community assets themselves. Be sure to capture the assets listed on the index cards. However, the “quilts” also need to be captured, as these represent creative ideas of linking assets – an initial step toward developing an action plan and strategy to address the issue you are assessing. To capture the quilts, take a picture of how the cards are physically organized, but it is best to have good notes as the group tells its “story” of how it came to link the assets together. The group leader could write up a short summary of the quilt as well.

What's Good About _____? Survey

- a. **Applicable context:** Surveys are best utilized when wanting to capture specific information from a large group of people.
- b. **Description:** A one-page survey used often to initiate strategic planning processes is provided (see Appendix B); it asks the respondents to rate more than 40 different community assets on a scale of 1 (poor) to 3 (excellent); it also includes a handful of open-ended questions, so respondents can identify their favorite thing about their community, what they want more of in the community, what they don't want in their community. Of course, the questions can be modified to focus on a particular issue.
- c. **Time requirement:** The survey should only take five-minutes to complete, which is a strength. The time required for promoting/distributing the survey and tallying the results will vary.
- d. **Information gathered:** The survey, in its current format, collects individuals' perceptions of different community characteristics and services. When aggregated, the most liked/appreciated/important characteristics or services in a community can be identified.
- e. **Participation diversity:** Surveys can provide the greatest degree of diversity, as it can be administered broadly

within a community or group, ideally capturing the entire relevant population. Sampling and statistical significance is not too important for community assessments; try to get as many responses of relevant people and run with the results.

- f. **Distribution possibilities:** Ideas for distributing the survey to get maximum responses would include: send it (or the web address of an online version) out with water bills, ask multiple organizations to collect responses from their memberships, hand out the survey at a community event – school open house, community festival, fair, etc.
- g. **Drawing conclusions from the assessment:** One strength of surveys is that the results can be quantified. Using the "What's Good About _____?" survey, calculate an average score for each category in the box; then sort the categories by this average score. Those categories with higher average scores are the more appreciated/better services; these represent assets. Those categories with the lowest average scores are logical areas to explore further and potentially address. Present the results of this survey to a group and ask them to talk about why the scores are high or low. Also try to tabulate the responses from the open-ended questions at the bottom of the survey by counting the number of times a response is given for each question.

APPENDIX A

Asset Types for Asset Quilting Exercise:

Assets are *existing* resources that the community has *some degree of control over* (it doesn't have to be complete control, but there needs to be reasonable access to use, manage or manipulate the resource). Ideas which see an alternative or complementary use of a resource for which control does not exist would be considered an "opportunity." For example, tribal land that could be used for industrial purposes might be an asset, but only if the tribe is part of the discussion and willing to consider the change in land use. Otherwise, using tribal land only represents an opportunity, to be followed up on in a conversation/meeting with appropriate individuals to discuss the proposed land use. Assets can be categorized into categories; the table below provides descriptions of commonly used asset categories and examples.

One should note that the categories are not meant to be mutually-exclusive; in other words, there is overlap across the

categories. So, a personal asset might be that an individual is a natural leader; or a physical asset might also be classified as a cultural or natural asset. The purpose of this classification system is not so much about the categories as it is to help guide participants in thinking broadly about the assets which *DO* exist in their communities. Have individuals identify assets that are relevant only to the issue you are assessing. Furthermore, don't worry if someone wrongly classifies an asset – the fact that it was identified means that it is important, at least to that individual, and it should be integrated into the exercise. Also, if someone is confused by a category name or definition, just have them jot down what they think is appropriate. Don't waste a lot of time getting assets on the index cards; again, the exercise is about identifying assets, not so much about the types of assets identified.

<i>Asset Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Personal	These are the talents, skills and abilities that an individual possesses; ask the participants to identify one of their own talents, skills, and abilities, or ask them to identify them for others specifically, or that exist in the community generically (e.g., there may be a well-known group of craftsmen and women; the local native American tribe are known for ____). The point is that these are talents, skills, and abilities that individuals use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A hobby: playing a musical instrument, artisan, etc. • Occupational skills: money management, organization/administration, welder, machinist, etc. • A collection (e.g., a family in Pawnee owns every steam engine ever made by a certain manufacturer) • Perspective/Outlook on life • Personality trait: extrovert, detail-oriented, etc.
Institutional	Institutional assets refer to those persistent forces which shape society; these can be public institutions, such as schools, libraries, and law enforcement; or these can be private institutions, such as civic groups, cultural norms, or long-lasting businesses. If these assets did not exist, your community would be radically different.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of library as a "3rd place" (a social gathering place) • A community benefactor/philanthropist • Friday night football • Eischen's Bar in Okarche • Vance Air Force Base in Enid
Cultural	These are assets which honor or manifest the history and heritage of your community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museums • Memorials • Cultural events, such as Pow-wows, fairs and festivals
Physical	Physical assets are "things" – anything you can see and touch. Typically there is a distinction made between 'built assets' (which are man-made stuff) and 'natural assets' (which are things found in nature)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific building • A park (e.g., disc golf course) • Useable land • Landmark • Specific/significant roads • Infrastructure (e.g., access to high quality water, exceptional broadband access)

Organizational	Organizational assets are those which reflect the identity, capacity and resources of groups within the community. Often, organizations represent something greater than the sum of the individuals they include – this may be due to a common religious belief, accumulation of financial and other resources, or the collective action of the group. Organizational assets could be groups themselves or what the groups are able to accomplish.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious organizations (e.g., churches, youth groups) • Civic organizations (e.g., Rotary Club, Lions Club) • Youth development organizations (e.g. 4-H, Scouts, National Honor Society) • Non-profit service providers (e.g., Red Cross, Salvation Army, Community Action Agencies and partners) • Other non-profit organizations (e.g., Extension, Chamber of Commerce, Industrial Authority)
Leadership	This is personal asset, ask people to identify individuals whose opinions are respected and who people naturally follow. Also ask people to identify an 'elected leader' and a 'non-elected' leader to increase the diversity of responses and identify informal leaders in the community that may need to be tapped for the current issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor, city council members • Long-time resident whose opinion is respected • Local activist • Local minister • School teacher • Extension educator
Natural	Natural assets are those which are present in your community that are naturally occurring – they are not the product of human intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wind • State park • Water supply • Natural amenities (e.g., lakes, mountains, rivers) • Shale deposits • Wildlife habitat
Financial	Financial assets are the monetary resources the community has available for projects. This would include local government resources (e.g., tax revenue and fees, grants), endowments (e.g., community funds), philanthropic funds (this could be generous local businesses, or formally established foundations).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General fund • Community Development Block Grant or Rural Economic Action Plan Grant programs (contact RD Specialist with Commerce for details) • Community foundation • Industrial authorities • Local utilities • Fundraisers
Political	Political assets would include political parties and their activities (which could be leveraged to educate residents or promote an issue), as well as the elected officials who represent the community. It would also include advocacy and lobbying groups, activists, and activities oriented toward changing local and state policies that affect your community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former and current state and federal Senators or Representatives • Advocacy organizations within the community • Annual events with an advocacy or activist emphasis • Republican and Democratic parties (memberships, meetings, events)
Social	While social assets is a broad category, here you would want to identify more informal social assets – more formal assets should be identified elsewhere (e.g., civic groups). These may involve community block/neighborhood parties/events, informal networks (i.e., friends), and family relationships. One could also include here community events that are not tied to one organization, or at least is promoted as a community-wide event (e.g., County fair, fall festival) – those opportunities that allow the community members to engage one another outside of our usual routines (i.e., work, civic activities, etc.). This could also identify groups that exist primarily for social purposes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mrs. Soandso's pool which is open to the neighborhood to use • Family relationships • Friends • Annual fall festival • Celebration <Your Town Name> • Red Hats and other women's groups • Senior groups

APPENDIX B

What's Good about _____?

The _____ is seeking your feedback about the following community characteristics. Please rate each characteristic as 1 (Poor), 2 (Fair), or 3 (Good), based upon your opinion of it. Feel free to skip any characteristic that you don't want to respond about. When you are done, add up the points for each group of questions, and then add up the group totals to get an overall total. This survey is completely anonymous, and your responses will help shape the future of _____. Thanks for your participation!

	Poor	Fair	Good		Poor	Fair	Good
Local Agriculture	1	2	3	Family Living Conditions	1	2	3
Local Industry	1	2	3	Retailers' Attitude	1	2	3
Local Stores	1	2	3	Community Organizations	1	2	3
Sources of Credit	1	2	3	Parks & Playgrounds	1	2	3
Access to Job Training and Retraining	1	2	3	School Buildings	1	2	3
Access to Education	1	2	3	Churches	1	2	3
Category totals:				Category totals:			
Availability of Doctors and Dentists	1	2	3	General Appearance of Roads, Parks, Streets	1	2	3
Ambulance Service EMS	1	2	3	Recreational Opportunities for all ages	1	2	3
Nursing Homes for the Aged	1	2	3	Law Enforcement	1	2	3
Sewage Disposal	1	2	3	Public Buildings	1	2	3
Water Supply	1	2	3	Road & Street Maintenance	1	2	3
Garbage and Trash Disposal	1	2	3	Retail Business District	1	2	3
Category totals:				Category totals:			
Civic Participation	1	2	3	Planning & Zoning	1	2	3
Social & Hobby Clubs	1	2	3	Parking Downtown	1	2	3
Fire Control	1	2	3	Attitudes of Local Residents to Progressive Developments	1	2	3
Internet Access	1	2	3	Other:	1	2	3
Conditions of Houses	1	2	3				
Safety	1	2	3				
Category totals:				Category totals:			
				TOTAL:			

The thing I like and enjoy about this area is:

I like the community the way it is and would not change anything: Yes No

If I could change one thing in this area it would be:

The types of industry /business I would like to see established in this area would be:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Industry/business I would not like to see established in this area:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

FOR CLASSIFICATION PURPOSES ONLY:

Sex: M F

Age group: 18-20 21-25 26-30 31-35

36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 56-60

61-65 65+

Do you live in the city limits of _____?

Yes No

References:

- Community Development-Data Information and Analysis Laboratory, Iowa State University Extension. 2001. "Preparing for a Collaborative Community Assessment." CRD 334; <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/CRD334.pdf>
- Rotary International. "Community Assessment Tools: A Companion Piece to Communities in Action: A Guide to Effective Projects." http://www.rotary.org/RIdocuments/en_pdf/605c_en.pdf

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- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education

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- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
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