URBAN COLLABORATORS

Resource Guide Series

Community Assessment Guide

Creating a Vision

(part 1)

The Urban Collaborators is a group of MSU Extension educators and the School of Planning, Design, and Construction faculty whose goal is to help revitalize Michigan's urban cities by linking research, outreach, and learning. The group helps bring MSU resources to local communities through MSU Extension in eight targeted cities: Detroit, Flint, Grand Rapids, Jackson, Lansing, Pontiac, Saginaw, and Ypsilanti.

The Urban Collaborators' Resource Guides are a series of bulletins on single topics related to community development and urban planning. These Resource Guides are the result of the successful linkages between research, outreach, and learning that the Urban Collaborators strive for. The Resource Guides provide practical techniques for citizen planners, community activists, and field educators to implement within their own communities. The guides are grounded in research and their practices have been tested in other communities to ensure that they are practical and accurate.

Each year, small teams of students are assigned to work in Michigan's communities for one semester on revitalization projects. The students carry out planning-related studies for community partners ranging from neighborhood associations to municipal governments. In this way, MSU faculty transfer the knowledge they've gained through research to students; students implement the practice through an outreach project in a community; communities gain valuable and practical technical assistance and resources; and students, faculty, and community representatives all learn through a collaborative process. These Resource Guides capture this process and transfer out the lessons learned so that other communities and local organizations can build their capacity to address their own community needs.

Urban Collaborators' Goals

- Implement key initiatives that enhance the linkage of research and outreach resources of the University with the community development needs of seven target cities.
- Provide substantive support for MSU Extension educators, community and economic development.
- Contribute to and learn from community development assignments in urban communities.
- Engage communities and scholars in ways that translate into new knowledge.
- Build the capacity of local organizations to address urban issues.

Teaching and Learning
Practice and Outreach
Research

Urban Collaborators is an inter-disciplinary effort supported by Michigan State University Extension (MSUE); the Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Social Science; the School of Planning, Design and Construction; the Provost; and Michigan Agriculture Experiment Station. It is administered through the Urban and Regional Planning Program, which provides graduate and undergraduate degrees in Urban Planning, and is part of the School of Planning, Design and Construction. The Urban Collaborators Resource Team is the operating committee for Urban Collaborators. Its membership includes University faculty and staff involved in urban research, outreach, and education.

Community Assessment Guide

Creating a Vision

What is a Community Assessment?

Community assessment is a process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting information about the needs of a community and the resources that are currently available in it to address those needs. Community assessment is a collaborative process that prioritizes needs, identifies resources, and guides decision-making.

A community assessment begins by convening a group of citizens around a community-wide need, creating a vision, and prioritizing the issues that require change. It is designed to allow those affected by change an opportunity to work alongside professionals and experts to inform them of community needs and also to guide how the change occurs. **Community assessment is a useful tool to gain a clear picture of what a community looks like now and what it could look like in the future.** Working through the community assessment process results in a plan to transform a community.

Successful Community Assessments...

- provide comprehensive, usable, and accurate information for decision-making
- assess the current situation
- identify current capacities, strengths, and resources of the community
- discover a vision of the future
- allow questions to drive the information gathering process
- address issues that stakeholders perceive as important
- lead to the change desired by stakeholders
- communicates the information gathered back to stakeholders
- involve stakeholders in the planning process

Why Should a Community Assessment be Conducted?

While there are several reasons to conduct a community assessment, **its primary purpose is to provide community information and data for collaborative decision-making**. It can provide a snapshot in time of a community to evaluate past planning efforts and/or create a new vision and plan for the future. Community assessments can also provide generalized and unbiased information for planning purposes or raise awareness of a community issue. In addition, many funders may require a community assessment to document and justify the community's needs and resources before they consider providing funding to implement a plan.

How is a Community Assessment Conducted?

While the steps involved in conducting a community assessment will vary depending on the community and the issues involved, there are several standard methods to reach the desired outcome.

This Resource Guide will focus on the first three steps of the community assessment. Steps 4-6 are covered in the *Community Assessment Guide: Collecting the Data (part 2)*. Steps 7-9 are discussed briefly below.

Because the process that developed the data for the community assessment was collaborative, it is imperative to report the findings back to the stakeholders. Holding public meetings to report findings, providing summary documents to interested persons, and inviting stakeholders to further visioning and planning meetings are critical.

Lastly, take time to celebrate. Completing a community assessment can be a long and intense process. Celebrate its completion, the work that was accomplished, and the cohesiveness of a community that has gone through an assessment. It is worth taking time to celebrate a community that cares about, is engaged in, and is willing to invest in its future. This will also give stakeholders rest before the next phase of work is started.

A community assessment can be either the means to an end or an iterative process; either way it is used to create a plan of action to take a community to its desired goal. As an end, the results of an assessment can be used to inform other planning initiatives such as master plan or comprehensive development updates or the creation of new plans such as a recreation or corridor development plans. As a means, the community assessment process can be repeated until the desired vision is attained.

Techniques to Create a Community Vision

The first step in a community assessment is to develop a vision of what stakeholders want their community to look like. There are many techniques that can be used to create a community vision. This guide will present four typically used methods:

- Focus Groups
- Interviews
- Public Meetings or Public Issues Forums
- Surveys

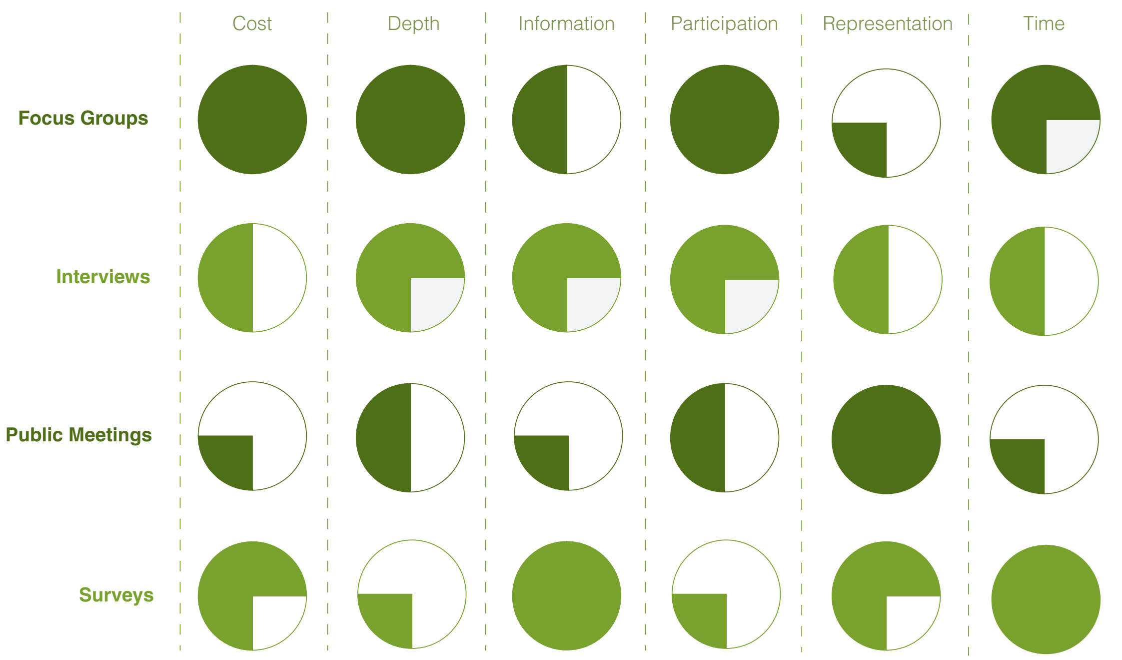
Communities often find that they need to employ several different techniques to answer all the relevant questions.

What follows is not an exhaustive list of how to prepare for, conduct, and analyze information gleaned from these techniques, but rather are key points that will help determine how the method will be conducted, identify what is needed to conduct it, and consider the resources available. Proper planning is very important to creating a successful technique. Much of the work for these methods is done in the planning phase.

Use the chart to explore which factors are important to your community and process when choosing a technique. In all cases, the more shaded the circle the more of that characteristic the technique possesses. While there are plenty of other factors to consider, let's examine six:

- Community **Representation:** Gather information and perspectives from a population set that can represent your community accurately. The information gathered should represent the whole community, not a small section. Therefore, sample sizes are essential to projecting the correct picture. For example, a public meeting has the potential to represent all of the community because it is open to the entire community.

- **Cost:** While many communities may want to or are mandated to use less expensive options, it is important to keep in mind that the technique should also provide the information you need for your visioning process.
- **Depth** of Information: Some techniques (e.g., focus groups) allow for a more complete understanding of what motivates certain perspectives and opinions; others simply ask what the perspective or opinion is (e.g., survey). Balance whether you need to know what an issue is or how the community feels about it.
- Amount of **Information**: Some methods, like surveys, allow for information to be collected on a wide variety of topics, while others are limited in scope.
- **Time:** The time represented is both the amount of time it takes to prepare the technique and the amount of time required to conduct it.
- Control of **Participation:** How much and the quality of information gathered can depend on the amount of control you have over the level of participation. For example, there is little control to be had over who returns a direct-mail survey.



How to Analyze & Report Findings

After conducting a visioning technique, analyze the information gathered to inform the planning process. After the technique is done, formalize the ideas into a summary document and share it with other members of the community. Depending on the topic, anonymity may be important. Be prepared to generalize comments by disassociating names with specific comments and making general statements about an issue.

1. Look for common thoughts.
2. Group like comments in categories or themes.
3. Name the categories/themes.
4. Write a short paragraph describing and summarizing the comments in the category/theme.
5. Note similarities and differences across categories/themes.

Once the analysis is complete, prepare the proper report format, which can range from a PowerPoint presentation to a formal report. Be sure to include methods used, major findings, and conclusions. Other sections for a more formal report may include an executive summary, background section that describes the issue being studied, recommendations, and next steps.

Community Assessment Guide

Techniques to Create a Community Vision

Focus Groups

Interviews

Public Issues Forums

Surveys

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a small group discussion held among the main stakeholders of the community and mediated by a skilled facilitator. While focus groups can provide more in-depth information on a small set of topics, it is difficult to project focus group opinions or data onto an entire community. Because of this limitation, focus groups are often used in tandem with other methods to get a more in-depth understanding of a set of issues. For example, a survey might identify certain issues in a community. These issues can then be brought to a focus group for some thorough discussions. Likewise, after data collection or asset mapping is completed, a focus group can review findings and brainstorm solutions or explore issues more fully.

Standards	Needs
People: 6–10	Private, neutral room
Length: 45–90 minutes	Table and chairs facing each other
Questions: 8 (but <12)	Nametags
How many groups: 3-4	Recording device
	Skilled facilitator
	Assistant for note taking and recording
	Ground rules
	Confidentiality and consent forms
	Incentive for participating

Group dynamics play a critical role in a focus group. Through dialogue and conversation, groups may discover issues that individuals (interviews or surveys) may not have considered.

At the same time, group dynamics may discourage individuals from voicing their concerns or overemphasizing others. Skilled facilitators are essential in controlling group dynamics in order to stay on topic and glean pertinent information.

Focus groups will garner opinions of community members and offer the opportunity to gather responses from population groups that may be difficult to survey. In addition, the focus group format allows for brainstorming and more open-ended and diverse responses. You may want to conduct several focus groups to ensure that a diversity of opinion is obtained.

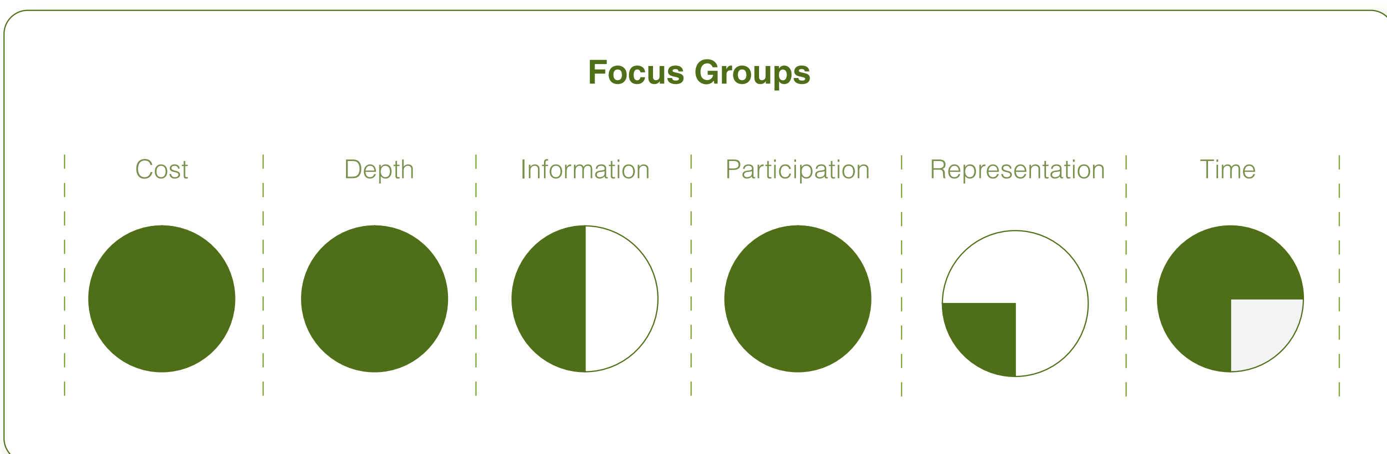
How to Prepare for a Focus Group

1. Prepare a set of predetermined questions for participants to respond to on one, maybe two, topic(s). Be sure to bookend the session with "icebreaker" and exit questions.
2. Create guidelines for how you want the focus group to flow and what rules you want participants to follow. Proper ground rules should help participants feel safe sharing their opinions with strangers.
3. Consider how to handle confidentiality and consent. A consent form may need to be developed and distributed.
4. Pick a neutral location.
5. Pick a relaxed setting with a table for participants to sit around; one that provides enough room for the facilitator to move around and where everyone can see each other.
6. While you may want to invite community leaders and other stakeholders, make sure that a range of opinions is obtained. For a non-random sample such as a focus group, care must be taken in identifying participants who represent important characteristics of everyone in the population. Typically the following selection methods are used:
   a. Nomination
   b. Random selection: If a large pool of participants is available, use a lottery to choose participants.
   c. All members of the same group.
   d. All members holding the same role or job title.
   e. Volunteers: Volunteers may respond to flyers or advertisements.

7. Provide an incentive for participation. Door prizes, snacks, meals, or a nominal monetary gift are all commonly used incentives to encourage attendance.
8. Chose a moderator based on his/her experience in facilitating groups. The moderator must ensure that there is equal and full participation with as many opinions expressed as possible.
9. Confirm participants' attendance.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

1. Welcome participants.
2. Review the purpose of the group, the goals of the meeting, and how the information they provide will be used.
3. Explain the flow of the meeting and lay the ground rules. Establish a safe environment.
4. One by one, ask the predetermined list of questions to stimulate thought and discussion. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions or to ask questions differently to solicit response.
5. Encourage quiet members to express their opinions.
6. The Assistant should take notes and record the session.
7. Make sure that all opinions are recorded.
8. Toward the end of the discussion, summarize what has been discussed before the group and ask if anyone has additional comments. This can be an effective way of gathering opinions that have not yet been voiced.
9. Tell members about any next steps that will occur, and what they can expect to happen.
10. Thank participants for coming and dismiss them.



PUBLIC ISSUES FORUM

A public issues forum is sometimes referred to as a community forum or public meeting and is held to discuss a topic, issue, need, or opportunity in a community. Public issues forums are typically started with a brief presentation on a topic followed by a moderated discussion about it, alternatives, opinions, and approaches. The moderator asks a series of predetermined questions and guides discussion, ensuring that all perspectives are explored. A series of public issues forums may need to be conducted to allow for follow-up discussion to occur and to gather a wider range of opinions.

Standards	Needs
People: ~50 (depends on topic)	Presenter and materials (computer, screen, laptop, LCD projector, white board)
Length: 90 minutes	Large, public room
Questions: 5-6	Chairs
How many forums: 2-3	Sign-in sheet
	Recording device
	Skilled facilitator
	Assistant for notetaking and recording
	Ground rules

Similar to a focus group, a public issues forum seeks information directly from community members, but this forum involves large public meetings instead of small-group settings. A public issues forum is a good way to quickly assess the opinions of a community's citizens. The very purpose of a public meeting is to encourage citizens to voice their opinions and allows an opportunity for all to participate. Because anyone can participate and it has a relatively open format, the possibility for shared learning and understanding can occur.

However, skilled moderation is required to ensure that opinions are expressed appropriately and all viewpoints are respected. In addition, a public issues forum participant is likely a person that has a strong opinion on the topic, which may not represent the broader community.

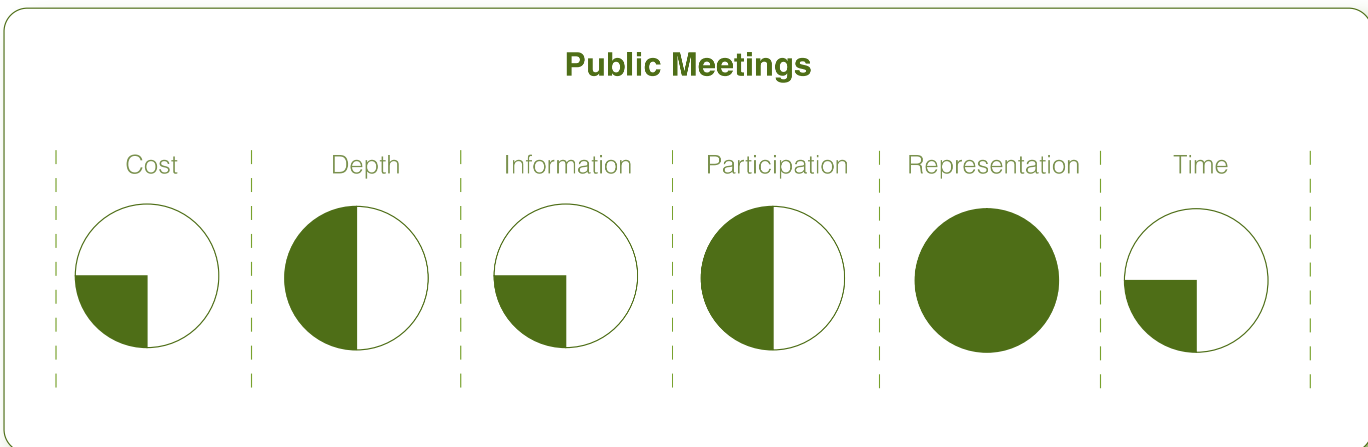
Like focus groups, public issues forums will garner opinions of community members and offers the opportunity to identify new, engaged stakeholders who may be interested in future planning initiatives. Public issues forums can offer valuable insights from an open forum and concerns and assumptions can be discussed and debated across the community.

How to Prepare for a Public Issues Forum

1. Prepare a presentation on the topic. A balance will need to be struck between including enough information on the topic so that citizens can understand it, conveying what you need discussion on, and staying brief.
2. Create a sign-in sheet that will gather all the contact information that you think you may need. For example, if you think you might be mailing information or surveys, request mailing addresses.
3. Prepare a set of predetermined questions that participants can respond to on one, maybe two, topic(s).
4. Create guidelines for how you want the forum to flow and what rules you want participants to follow. Proper ground rules should help participants feel safe sharing their opinions.
5. Pick a large room with lecture style seating.
6. Publicize the public meeting following state laws.
7. Chose a moderator based on his/her experience in facilitating groups. The moderator must ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity and that the environment remains calm.

How to Conduct a Public Issues Forum

1. Welcome participants. Ask them to sign-in.
2. Review the purpose of the group, the goals of the meeting, and how the information that the participants provide will be used.
3. Introduce the presenter and the moderator. If time and group size allow, let all participants introduce themselves.
4. Provide a brief presentation on the topic.
5. Explain the flow of the meeting and lay the ground rules. Establish a safe environment.
6. One by one, ask the predetermined list of questions to stimulate thought and discussion. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions or to ask questions differently to solicit response.
7. Encourage participation and calm and balanced sharing.
8. The Assistant should take notes during and record the session.
9. Make sure that all opinions are recorded.
10. Toward the end of the discussion, summarize what has been discussed before the group and ask if anyone has additional comments. This can be an effective way of gathering opinions that have not yet been voiced.
11. Tell participants about any next steps that will occur and what they can expect to happen.
12. Thank participants for coming and dismiss them.



INTERVIEWS

Interviews are a conversation between a small group of people to obtain detailed information about a particular aspect of the community. For a community assessment, interviewees should be key stakeholders or decision-makers in the community. Interviews and surveys are good techniques to gather preliminary information on a subject. Focus groups, public issues forums, and data collection methods for further inquiry or planning can build on the information gathered from interviews and surveys.

Interviews involve a dialogue between two people, the interviewer and the interviewee, using predetermined questions. It is similar to a survey, but it provides for more opportunity for free flowing dialogue. Additionally, the interview provides a healthy guarantee of participation. The depth of information also provides some unique flexibility. Unlike the focus group and public issues forum, the interview provides the vehicle to cover broad or narrow topics in depth. But gathering information from only a small set of people makes it impossible to project opinions to the community at large.

Standards	Needs
People: 5–10	Contact information
Length: 20 minutes	Predetermined questions
Questions: 30	

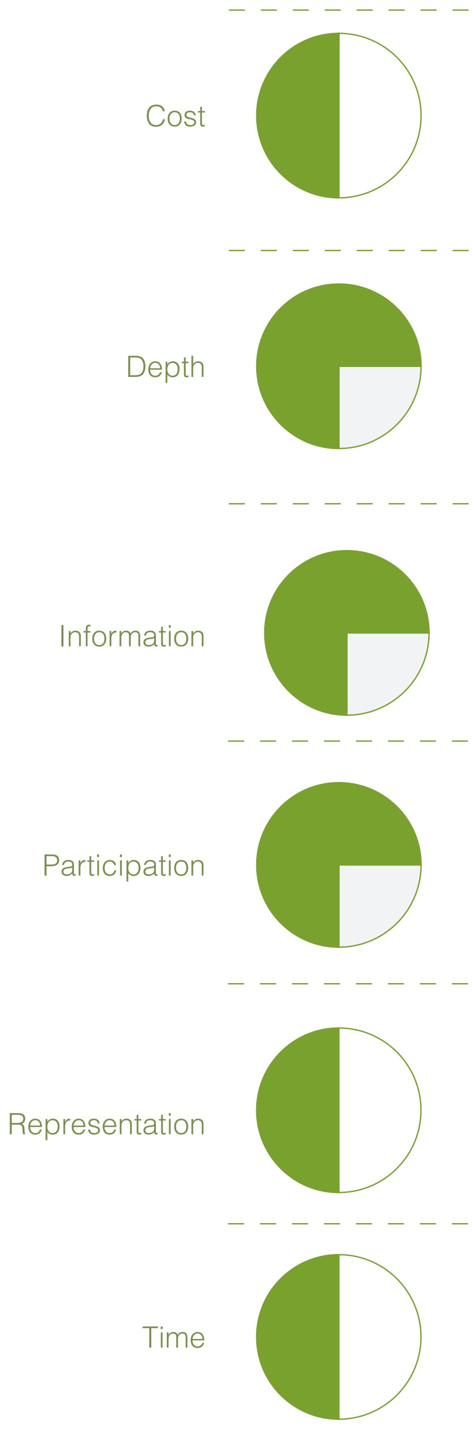
How to Prepare for Interviews

1. Prepare a script for the interviewer to follow precisely.
2. Identify the interviewees and collect their contact information.
3. Consider confidentiality issues.
4. Determine which type of interview you will conduct:
   a. Face-to-face or in-person interviews are much more personal and lay the groundwork for a relationship to develop, but they require the most time.
   b. Telephone interviews are most common and are convenient when the two parties are separated by distance or when setting up a face-to-face interview is impractical.
   c. E-mail interviews are an inexpensive option for interviewing. However, chances for probing or follow-up questions are limited, unless clarifying e-mails are sent back and forth. Therefore, be very clear about what is needed when the interviewee is first contacted.

How to Conduct an Interview

1. Let the interviewee know approximately how long the interview will take so that s/he is prepared.
2. Review the purpose of the interview, the goals of the interview, and how the information will be used.
3. Explain your confidentiality policy. Typically comments are not attributed directly to interviewees but rather are generalized and not attributed to their source.
4. If recording the conversation, ask for permission to do so.
5. Provide the interviewee with any materials that s/he will need to refer to in advance.
6. Be prepared to ask follow-up questions or to ask questions differently to solicit response.
7. Speak loudly, clearly and with pitch variation.
8. Take notes.
9. Tell interviewees about any next steps that will occur and what they can expect to happen.
10. Finish the conversation cordially, and thank the interviewee.

Interviews


Cost
Depth
Information
Participation
Representation
Time

SURVEYS

Surveys are questionnaires that interviewees either fill out themselves or are asked through a scripted interview. Questions are scripted and interviewees select from a list of predetermined responses. Surveys can be used to find out attitudes and reactions, measure client satisfaction, or gauge opinions about various issues. They are used to find statistically valid information about a large number of people. In addition to providing useful information for the assessment process, surveys also have the potential to increase the likelihood of engagement among community members who participate.

Standards	Needs
Length: 20–30 minutes	Contact information
Questions:	Survey Instrument

Surveys and interviews are good techniques to gather preliminary information on a subject. Focus groups, public issues forums, and data collection methods for further inquiry or planning can build on the information gathered from surveys and interviews.

While there are many positive characteristics and results gained from conducting a survey, its most notable downfall is the lack of control over participation. Once the survey is in the hands of the interviewee, nothing can be done to secure its completed return.

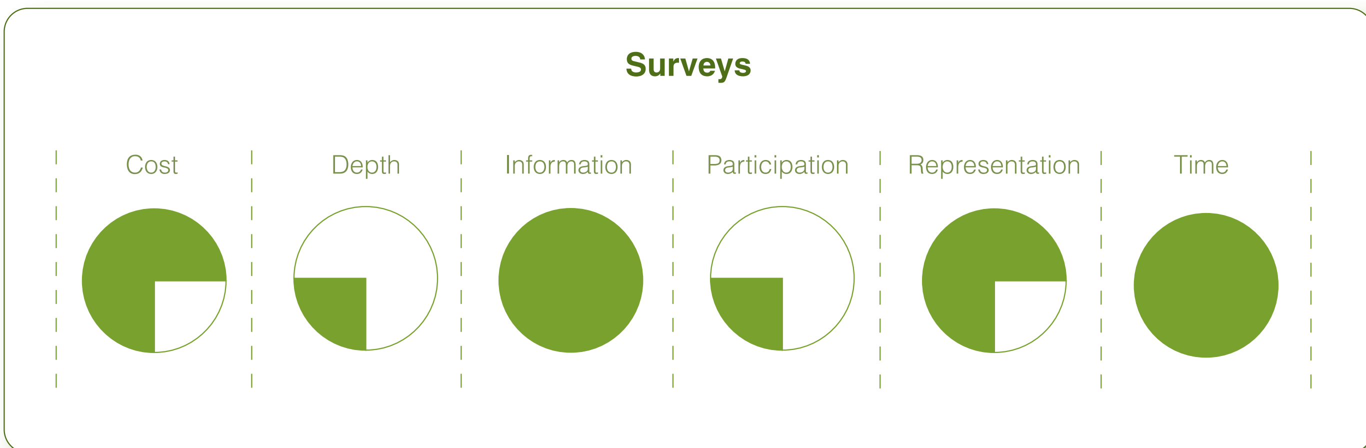
How to Prepare for a Survey

1. Identify the interviewees and collect their contact information.
2. Consider confidentiality issues.
3. Prepare a survey instrument that includes an introduction and questions with answers to select from. The questions and responses must be crafted with care to ensure that the appropriate information is gathered. Be mindful of the educational level of your interviewees. You may want to consider getting an expert to help you determine the sample size and build questions.
4. Determine which type of survey you will conduct:
    a. E-mail or web-based surveys have become the preferred survey method because of their convenience to distribute, take, and analyze. You can also track who has started and/or completed the survey. E-mails reminding participants of the survey availability may also be sent.
    b. Telephone interviews are excellent for ensuring a completed survey and asking follow-up questions, but due to the national do not call registry and increased use of technology for survey fielding, their use has declined significantly.
    c. Direct mail surveys are another option, but may be costly depending on the number of surveys being mailed. You will also need to supply a way for those who complete a survey to return it to you. While this is an excellent way to disseminate a survey, there is very little control allowed over who completes and returns one.
    d. Media distributed surveys are those that are distributed within a local newspaper or other media outlet. They are designed for general distribution but have the least amount of control over who receives, completes, and returns a survey.
    e. Group administration is another distribution option. A survey can be distributed to a group or meeting and members asked to complete it during the meeting. This may be an efficient way to collect information. If you want to distribute the survey at a group meeting or gathering, discuss it with the group's director, and request to be put on the agenda. At the meeting, introduce yourself and explain the purpose of the survey. Then distribute the survey, answer any questions, and collect completed surveys. Thank everyone for their participation.

Whichever method you choose, keep in mind that you are trying to gather the opinions of as many people as possible that represent the community. For surveys, the larger the pool of potential participants, the better chances you have at projecting the results across the community.

How to Conduct a Survey

1. Let the interviewee know approximately how long the interview will take so that s/he is prepared.
2. Review the purpose of the interview, the goals of the interview, and how the information they provide will be used.
3. Explain how you will handle confidentiality. Typically comments are not attributed directly to interviewees but rather are generalized and not attributed to their source.
4. Provide the interviewee with any materials that s/he will need to refer to in advance.
5. Ask the scripted questions and give the response choices. Do not deviate from the preselected answer options.
6. Record the responses.
7. Tell interviewees about any next steps that will occur, and what they can expect to happen.
8. Finish the conversation cordially, and thank the interviewee.



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- Conducting Focus Group Discussions by ETR Associates (*www.etr.org/tabono/Images/FILES/basic%20evaluation%20on%20focus%20groups.pdf*)
- Community Assessment Tools by Rotary International(*www.rotary.org/RIdocuments/en_pdf/605c_en.pdf*)
- Grisham, Jr., Vaughn L. 1999. Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

ADDITIONAL MSU RESOURCES

- Land Policy Institute: *www.landpolicy.msu.edu*
- MSU Extension: *www.msue.msu.edu/portal/*
- Community Development Area of Expertise Team: *www.msue.msu.edu/portal/default.cfm?pageset_id=516158*
- Community and Economic Development Team: *http://web5.msue.msu.edu/eced/*
- Economic Development Area of Expertise Team: *http://web1.msue.msu.edu/aoe/econdevaoe/*
- Land Use Area of Expertise Team: *http://ntweb11.ais.msu.edu/luaoe/index.asp*
- Michigan Citizen Planner Program: *http://citizenplanner.msu.edu/*
- State and Local Government Area of Expertise Team: *http://web5.msue.msu.edu/slg/*
- School of Planning, Design, and Construction: *http://spdc.msu.edu/*
- Small Town Design Initiative/Community Design Initiative: *http://spdc.msu.edu/RealWorldApplicationsofKnowledge/OutreachEngagementExtensionPrograms/SmallTownDesignInitiative.aspx*
- Urban Collaborators: *http://spdc.msu.edu/RealWorldApplicationsofKnowledge/OutreachEngagementExtensionPrograms/UrbanCollaborators.aspx*

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