Situation Analysis Reporting Across Virginia through Virginia Cooperative Extension

Authored by Karen Vines, Assistant Professor and Continuing Professional Education Specialist, Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, Virginia Tech; Subrato Kuri, PhD Graduate, Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, Virginia Tech and Mike Lambur, Extension Leader, Community Learning through Data Driven Discovery (CLD3), Virginia Tech

Introduction

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) takes pride in the premise that vital programming is based on the issues, problems, and needs of the people. A thorough analysis of the situation provides context for understanding these problems. This is a process of determining what situations exist at local, regional, and state levels, and for determining which problems have become issues of major public concern. Situation analysis provides the foundation and rationale for deciding which problems should receive the time, energy, and resources of VCE.

Process for Cooperatively Determining Programs

It is important to involve people in the process of analyzing the situation and identifying issues, problems, and opportunities at all levels of Extension programming: federal, state, and local. The Extension Unit Staff, the local Extension Leadership Council (ELC), Extension personnel and community people cooperatively determine what questions should be asked, what data should be collected, how it should be analyzed, and what that information means in context. A variety of people representative of the population need to be involved in the situation analysis process. Deciding "what should be" or "which is more desirable" of several options involves the consensus of judgements made by individuals.

Both users and non-users of VCE are vital participants in situation analysis. An aggressive effort is required to ensure that all under-served groups and minorities are represented. The determination and prioritizing of issues and problems to be addressed by Extension programs is a cooperative people-oriented process, consistent with the VCE mission. This process is at the heart of problem-focused programming.

The External Environment of Accountability and Scarce Resources

The environment surrounding Extension programs is constantly changing. It is critical that Extension educators periodically review the situation and environment, the community in which they live and work, the people who live there, and the problems or barriers to their economic and social well-being. Public perception of relevance is reflected in state agency funding allocations. Decision-makers and the public focus sharp attention on the use of public dollars. They question whether agencies are doing the "right" programming. There is an expectation of both results and accountability for public dollars spent.

Mandates associated with public dollars are asking that programs be grounded in needs defined by the community.

Extension Programming Implies Change

The VCE Situation Analysis process is carried out in four steps described below (Lambur, n.d.). In VCE, the Extension Leadership Council (ELC) is a group of volunteers at the local level that serves as a partner in this process. ELC membership is intended to be representative of the community in which the Extension unit is situated. ELC's ideally provide guidance in the development of the situation analysis report in addition to assisting with prioritizing issues, program development, program implementation, and program evaluation (Vines, 2018).

Step 1: Organize for Action

A key element in looking at the situation of a unit is through the involvement of local stakeholders. It is essential that a situation analysis plan be constructed to guide the process. This plan should be developed at a meeting of the unit ELC. A meeting of the ELC should be conducted that discusses the purpose of situation analysis, looks at the tasks and decisions needed to be made, assigns responsibility for carrying out those tasks and responsibilities, and establishes a time frame for conducting the situation analysis. In situation analysis it is very important to have the diversity that exists in the community reflected in the Extension program.

Step 2: Develop a Unit Profile

The second step in situation analysis is to develop a profile that characterizes the unit. The unit profile is a descriptive piece based on quantitative data gathered from a variety of sources including the Census Bureau, state governmental departments and agencies, Planning District Commissions, city and county agencies, and various service agencies. It provides a snapshot for program planners and unit residents indicating current unit baseline data to gauge the effectiveness of Extension educational programs.

A beginning profile is provided for all VCE units. A suggested approach to utilizing the profiles is to:
1. Access and review the unit profile. Supplement if needed with additional data and information,
2. present the data to the ELC and conduct a discussion around it to identify strengths and potential issues and problems of the unit. The basis for this discussion should focus on how the data is changing over time and the comparison of these data to other standards (i.e., federal, state, or other unit data and research standards), and
3. based on this discussion, additional data that needs to be collected may be identified.

Step 3: Assess Needs from a Community and Resident Perspective

After compiling a unit profile, the ELC then focuses on understanding the nature of challenges and opportunities facing the unit from a community and resident perspective. The purpose of this situation analysis activity is to assess peoples' knowledge, attitudes, and other perspectives on what issues and problems they think impact their lives both positively and negatively. In addition, it also allows the ELC to get in touch with other groups, agencies, and organizations from which collaborations might be formed to further address issues and problems.

The first step is to develop a list of questions that will be asked. In general, these might include:
• What are the positive and negative characteristics that most accurately define the unit?
• What are the most pressing issues and problems confronting residents in the unit?
• What strengths and resources are currently in the unit to address these issues and problems?
• What barriers prevent residents from addressing the issues and problems?

- How can Extension help to address the issues and problems through educational programming?

Three methods recommended for collecting community information include focus groups, key informant interviews, and community surveys. Using a combination of these methods is ideal and facilitates the collection of information and perspectives from different groups in the unit. However, it is not necessary to use all three methods. Limits of time, money, and individual and collective energies may make trying to do so impractical.

Step 4: Interpret Data and Decide on Program Direction
Once the ELC has completed the development of a unit profile and assessed needs from a community and resident perspective, the final step in situation analysis is to interpret the data and decide on the direction for Extension educational programs. In this step, decisions and actions should be taken to address the following questions:
1. What are the issues identified in the situation analysis process?
2. What is VCE presently doing?
3. What issues are of priority interest to the ELC?
4. What renewed direction should VCE programs take?

With a thorough understanding of the issues and answers to the questions posed above, the ELC can then prioritize the issues for appropriate action.

Evaluation of the reports
Improvement of situation analysis reports is an ongoing process. A process for formative evaluation is being developed that will include a checklist that agents can use to assess the quality of their reports and make improvements prior to submission (Kuri, Vines, & Lambur, 2020). Situation analysis reports were most recently completed in 2018 and are currently informing program development across the statewide VCE organization. The checklist is currently undergoing revision prior for use in 2022. Organizations can also use the tool for identifying the in-service training needs of the staff.

Situation Analysis reporting across the rural-urban spectrum
As designed and implemented, the VCE situation analysis process does not take into consideration rural and urban unit context. However, through evaluation of the 2018 VCE situation analysis reports we observed some differences between rural and urban counties. For purposes of this chapter we identified ten urban and rural counties based on the definitions of rural and urban used by VCE. For VCE, urban counties have populations greater than 50,000, while rural counties have populations below 50,000 (Grymes, 2019). The list of selected counties and the population as reported in the 2018 situation analysis reports is included in Table 1.

Table 1. Urban and rural counties included for discussion of differences related to rural and urban communities based on population differences.

Urban Counties		Rural Counties	
County	Population	County	Population
Albemarle/ City of Charlottesville	107,000	Appomattox	15,681
Alexandria	160,035	Floyd	15,594
Arlington	225,200	Highland	2,230

Fairfax	1,148,433	Lee	25,587
Lynchburg	260,232	Mecklenburg	30,686
Newport News	179,388	Nelson	14,493
Norfolk	242,823	Northampton	11,846
Richmond City	227,032	Patrick	18,180
Roanoke	312,891	Prince George	37,803
Virginia Beach	461,663	Tazewell	45,000

Source of population data is the VCE 2018 Situation Analysis Reports.

Both the rural and urban communities in this sample used a variety of methods of data collection. Key informant interviews, secondary data sources, and surveys to identify the current situation and needs were used in both types of communities. Urban communities also included brainstorming with volunteer Extension Leadership Committee members as a method of data collection. Rural counties also included focus groups with Farm Bureau, issues and public forums with community residents, and a strengths-weaknesses-opportunity-threat assessment with community leaders.

In both of the groups, surveys were cited most frequently as a data source. Surveys were distributed through face-to-face interaction, e-mail, social media, the local government website, newspaper, Extension offices, and community events in the rural communities. Urban localities used multiple methods of distribution also including television. In both localities, the reports indicate that survey responses were gathered from community residents, Master Gardeners and associations, public schools, and county administration or officials. Responses were also received from other undisclosed agencies in the rural communities. In urban communities, responses were also received from volunteers, in general, local business owners, private organizations, community minority groups, VCE partners, and 4-H leaders.

There are also differences based on state, rural, and urban community issue area rankings (Table 2). These listings validate the concept that programming in VCE begins at the local level rather than being a top-down model. While there may be more efficiency and consistency if programming were driven based on a compilation of needs identified at the state level, this data demonstrates that some of the needs identified in local communities would not be addressed.

Table 2 Compared frequencies of issue areas ranked for the state, rural counties, and urban localities in Virginia as identified in the 2018 VCE Situation Analysis Reports.

| Major Identified Issue Areas | Frequencies | | |
	State Level (N= 94)	Rural Counties (n= 10)	Urban Localities (n= 10)
Healthy Living and Nutrition Education	1st	4th	2nd
Environmental Issues	2nd	NL	9th
Youth Activities	3rd	1st	NL
Career Preparedness	4th	6th	NL
Agricultural production and profitability	5th	3rd	6th
Agriculture Sustainability/Preservation	6th	5th	NL
Education quality for youth	7th	NL	NL
Aging Population	8th	NL	10th
Basic life skills training for Youth	9th	2nd	1st

Child Development and Parent Education	10th	9th	NL
Local Foods Awareness and Initiatives	NL	7th	8th
Marketing Opportunities for Livestock Producers	NL	5th	NL
Natural Resources Preservation	NL	8th	NL
Food Safety and Preservation	NL	10th	NL
Financial Education	NL	NL	3rd
Healthy Food Access	NL	NL	4th
Water Quality	NL	NL	5th
Availability of an Affordable Food Supply and Urban Agriculture	NL	NL	6th

Note. NL= Issues not listed in the top ten prioritized issues

There are some issue areas that are included in rural and urban counties as well as across the state. These include healthy living and nutrition education, agricultural production and profitability, and basic skill training for youth. These suggest areas where statewide program issue teams could develop programming at a broader level, while being sure to incorporate more specific needs at the community level. However, in the urban localities, there also appears to be great need for financial education, healthy food access and affordability, and water quality. Similarly, rural counties identified needs in youth activities in general, agriculture sustainability and preservation, career preparedness, local foods awareness and initiatives along with marketing opportunities for livestock producers, natural resources preservation, and food safety and preservation. These findings suggest a need for different resources and different types of expertise be directed to different communities, and could be tailored towards more rural or urban audiences. Inclusion of potential participants and local Extension agents, along with specialists, researchers, and other faculty at Virginia Tech and Virginia State University could help to accomplish this.

Opportunities for improvement for the future

An ongoing challenge for VCE is making sure that input for situation analysis is coming from audiences beyond those already involved with existing programming. The urban localities emphasized gathering data from community minority groups which has been a long-time area of emphasis. Training provided leading up to the 2018 situation analysis reporting process emphasized going where these audiences are in order to make sure their voices were included and their needs identified. We need to continue to work in this area and work to include definition in the situation analysis reports that indicates whether or not new audiences are being included in the process.

Additionally, a concern is always whether or not the people participating in the process feel comfortable identifying true community needs or if they limit their responses to the types of programming that VCE has traditionally provided. Agents leading up to the 2018 reporting process were encouraged to gather needs broadly with the intent that the situation analysis report should be a valuable product provided to local communities and local governments. Many agencies engage in needs assessment, but if a thorough, reputable process has already occurred, these agencies can use the VCE reports and avoid the time and expense required to complete a thorough assessment. The situation analysis report becomes a value-added product that VCE provides to the local community. In addition, by reporting true needs, rather than needs within a traditional VCE programming context, VCE, universities, and other entities (e.g., local government, agencies, and organizations) can identify areas in which investment of resources, personnel, and research need to be made to better meet community needs.

Currently, a system-wide situation analysis is conducted every five years. However, individual units are also encouraged to update their situation analysis on a yearly basis. We really do not know the extent to which this takes place. Because of the critical importance of issue and problem identification and wise use of resources, VCE should restructure its Situation Analysis process to include using a variety of environmental scanning approaches and other tools, such as leveraging big data, hyper-local social media trends, and awareness of national trends outside our regular channels, for examining existing data on a regular basis (e.g., yearly) to contribute assessing issues and problems.

References

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