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Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Needs Assessment

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Introduction and Background

This publication includes the findings of focus groups conducted with Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agents and specialists in spring 2021 related to needs assessment. This area of inquiry was one of four categories included in the study of mid-career agents and specialists, between three and seven years of service, to evaluate their needs at this stage in their career. Findings associated with needs assessment address three of the four objectives of this project: 1) Identify career-related challenges experienced by VCE professionals in years three to seven in their careers, 2) Identify opportunities for change in the work environment or professional development programming that increase support and retention for Extension professionals in this time, and 3) Identify unique and shared needs for Extension agents and specialist.

Additional VCE publications from this study are:

- Demographics and Methodology - https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html

- Competency findings - https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/ALCE/ALCE-287/ALCE-287.html

- Sources of stress findings - https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/alce-290/alce-290.html

Findings for the remaining categories will be linked from this publication as they become available. These include: Mentoring, Professional development organizations, and Organizational support and effectiveness.

Methods

A complete methodology is included in the earlier publication, Virginia Cooperative Extension Mid-Career Focus Group Findings – Methodology and Demographics (https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/pubs_ext_vt_edu/en/ALCE/ALCE-279/ALCE-279.html). The premise for including this section was the finding of Powers et al. (2017) that a thorough community needs assessment helped Extension professionals focus their efforts on priority areas and achieve better work-life balance. Challenges in work-life balance are consistently reported in research associated with VCE and other Cooperative Extension careers (Vines et al., 2018, 2021), so the

research team felt this was an important area to explore. Focus group participants were asked to 1) share the methods they used for needs assessment, 2) identify benefits and challenges associated with the methods they used for needs assessment, 3) indicate how their needs assessment findings connected with their unit or departmental Extension priorities, and 4) identify resources that VCE might provide to assist them with needs assessment.

Participant focus group and research team discussions following the focus groups were reviewed and analyzed based on emerging themes. Findings from all of these groups are included here.

Findings Overview

Methods
Methods are reported as shared by agents only, specialists only, and both agents and specialists.

Agent Methods
Methods reported as being used by agents only were working with advisory committees, conducting interviews, referencing situation analysis reports, and working with community coalitions and groups. One agent expressed interest in using focus groups but was concerned about the amount of time they required. Extension Leadership Councils (ELCs) were one form of advisory group used by some agents. One agent spoke of working with her Livestock Steering Committee that provided guidance for both 4-H and agricultural programs. Members of the committee were 4-H volunteers and farmers.

One agent said, "I've also done informal interviews with my own stakeholders to see what partner organization needs are." Another agent spoke about how working with community coalitions and groups has helped move her work into topic areas not traditionally covered by VCE. She said,

> Working with other outside groups and coalitions and seeing the needs of the county from a different angle is helpful too. I was on the Community Services Board for several years and looking at folks with mental illness and drug addiction and things that we don't even think about as deeply. Maybe a question or two in our situation analysis that actually seeing the needs of folks with this situation, and that sort of led me to do some programming for folks I probably wouldn't have otherwise. So, being connected with other organizations and coalitions and seeing the needs from different angles.

Some agents referenced the involvement of their ELCs in developing their situation analysis reports. One agent emphasized this as guiding her work. Another agent talked about using these as part of her orientation as a new agent. She said, "I would say, when I first started it was really reading those situational analyses. I do cover a really large area, so reading those and kind of skimming over those has been helpful." A 4-H agent spoke about how the situation analysis helped them understand the perspectives of community residents. He said,

> The situation analysis, it's kind of taught me as we are going through that all that data, the community data - helped me learn where all the community members, all the residents of our county work. In terms of just general - do they work in the county? Do they go to jobs outside of the county? What sort of jobs? Probably when you're working with 4-H stakeholders, I mean you got to keep in mind - 4-H parents are working, somewhere. Even though you're an Extension Agent, and you think you're working hard, maybe the parents forget that they're working somewhere, too. So that helps remind me of that. And I thought that was a valuable takeaway from that process.

One agent expressed concern about maintaining program relevance when he does not follow the lead of programming in other counties, so that others working in the space to fill gaps. He said,

And every now and then, I will miss a program opportunity. A while ago there was an agent in a neighboring county that had this program for breeding soundness exams for [beef] producers. And they had to have a location and they would have producers come in. They would contract for the vet to do the work. And they were able to network, all of this. And this morning, I was somewhere, and I saw that this facility and this vet had figured out how to do that and were doing it without me. And I just saw it [a flyer] on the wall, and I was stunned. Because, like several years ago, I wanted to do this program, and for whatever reason it fell off my radar. And now, it's just being done without any impact from me. And how do I still be relevant when you have different businesses and other things, fill in some of the gaps that maybe I don't address? And that's kind of hard. But I feel that I'm doing all that I can on that. But there's so much stuff that I don't even know.

Specialist Methods

Basing needs on available funding, working with program teams, and attending district meetings to identify needs were exclusively mentioned by specialists. A tenure track specialist shared,

> Rather right or wrong, you sort of respond to funding sources and what they say the needs are right [now]. And so, you end up doing what you can get money to do so that's how that works in there, as far as if I use those or not, but I guess I did because I apply for the funding.

A non-tenure track specialist also looks at grants based on national determinations of needs, but then incorporates the wisdom of the program team to determine where to apply. She said,

> So, nationally, they make some determinations about what are some of the biggest health issues and what are some effective ways of addressing those. And then they start pushing money and grants and things in to support all of those activities. So, listening to what's happening at the national level, [I] see how it's relevant to Virginia, as in terms of a health issue. And I say health, but it could be something that impacts health - not health directly. And then bringing back the program team and saying, 'Look, this looks like this is an issue. Is it an issue here in Virginia? Is it something we want to address with Extension agents?' If the answer is yes, then okay let's get the program.

Two non-tenure track specialists identified agents as the target community for their programming. One specialist spoke about the program teams, emphasizing the need to have the right people fully participating in the team to make her needs assessment work. She said,

> So, from my perspective when I'm talking about community and I'm thinking community – so, there's a couple ways that I can define community. But as an Extension specialist, I define my community as Extension agents, to tell you the truth. Extension agents in the communities they're working in - that's my community – right? And so, how do I engage with Extension agents to know what their needs are relative to my area of expertise as an Extension specialist? I do that in a couple ways - one by being part of a program team. And I think, even though program teams, the functionality of program teams is hit and miss, I guess. But over the past six years, I've begun to really appreciate the program team. Particularly if the right people are involved and are fully engaged with the program team. Because it's there that we begin saying, 'Okay, what's the direction for, in my case, in the food nutrition and health program team?' which is my area of expertise.
>
> What's the area that we need to be focusing on? And we're thinking of it long term, not just short term. But, long term, and how can we, as a program team composed of specialists and Extension agents, how can we then provide the resources, money, funds, etc. the actual curriculum to move in that direction and also measure our outcomes? So, I think it's a great model. It's taken me five or six years to really appreciate how potentially and actually our work is in our program team. But I'm beginning to see the light.

The other specialist also spoke about gathering input from district meetings. She said,

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How do we do so? By listening to them [agents]. That's where I'm getting lots of information on what my needs are. The other way is to attend district meetings and present what I'm doing and try to get feedback from agents who are participating in those district meetings about whether or not I'm heading in the right direction or not headed in the right direction. So it's a lot of that. And I was trying to think of another. Those are the two primary ways I think - when I'm thinking about my community, who is Extension agents.

She went on to talk about how she provides direction to the program team using other sources. She continued,

The other way, though, that I determine what our program team should be focusing on - so in the program team realm is to know where the national, to look at the state and the national issues that are being supported, either through the CDC or the Division Department of Health.

Methods used by both Agents and Specialists

Both agents and specialists identified informal listening to clientele, use of secondary data, and collecting survey data as means of needs assessment. Many professionals reflected using multiple methods of needs assessment in combination.

Informal listening

Established relationships - The value of establishing relationships that could guide needs assessment came up in focus groups with both agents and specialists. One agent said,

When I started here, the agent before had been gone for a while. So, a lot of those personal relationships were gone and I had to build . . .. I didn't even know who was out there. So, you have to build it from scratch, even the needs-based part.

Agents and specialists spoke about how they established relationships with people who might contact them with needs. In addition, they were proactive in seeking out needs through farm or site visits and other local events. One agent shared how her specialist role changed her approach to needs assessment. She said,

I'm just commercial horticulture. Whereas, if I was the county agent I would be working with anyone and everyone. So, I'm a little more narrow [in focus]. But a lot of my programming still is for community youth that do everything. So, I gear my stuff more to farmers, who are trying to make a profit. So, a lot of that comes from just finding those growers and calling them up, or having conversations on farm visits. I've gotten a lot better information from folks when I'm actually having conversations than when I request either a call or even a paper survey - anything like that. I feel like they're much more likely to talk to me than they would be to write anything. So that's been the most successful for me.

Similarly, a specialist reported "hanging out" at businesses associated with her target audience. She said,

So, we have projects going. And so, trying to make good connections with the executive directors there, and while we're there. Trying to assess what we see are potential problems with what's going on, or challenges for the [business]. In my extension review, they mentioned that I probably should do something, formally. And I was like, that's a great idea. No one had mentioned that before. So, I think that's what I do need to do is to really make it more formal. I've tried to build relationships where they know if they have concerns . . . I have a number of [businesses] in the area that will reach out. So, I feel like I've become a resource for them. But I'm trying to get a little bit more - diving into what they really see as their problems and their challenges that I may or may or may not be able to help with. Hopefully, I can. I think I need to do a little bit better of assessment there.

Another agent shared his approach. He said,

> I spend a lot of time out in the community, as everybody else has said. Mine looks a little different. I'm going to heifer sales and bull sales, and networking with people that are within the content area that I work in. And I try to stay in touch with my core group, but then also try to continue to diversify the different people within the community that I'm reaching out too. I think it all goes back to just trying to have those boots on the ground and knowing that they can also contact me, which I feel like is really good. We just did our ag damage assessment from these huge ice storms that we had. I knew who I could count on. But I also knew who I could count on to give me somebody else that I could contact - and just that spider web effect of communication.

Advisory groups - Relationships with advisory groups were also identified as playing a role in needs assessment for agents and specialists. Agents often mentioned whether or not they had an active Extension Leadership Council (ELC) when responding to this group of questions. This is most likely because the instructions for the organized situational analysis which come from VCE leadership emphasize involving the ELC in the process. One agent said,

> The methods I use to access the needs of my community is just having relationships with my stakeholders. We do not have an ELC in our office, but I do have a Livestock Steering Committee that is for both 4-H and AG. And so, I get most of my needs assessment from them because they are comprised of 4-H volunteers and farmers.

In the case of the specialist, agents serve in advisory capacity by providing needs they identify with their clientele. The specialist said,

> I think for needs assessment, we do a lot of working like - just depending on what the program or project is - but for each overall [project] we have opportunities to look at that needs assessment. But we try to do it from the local level in a way where that data can be aggregated together to come up. But we also work a lot on a case by case basis. So, we might just be going into the southeast district or the southwest district. And so, we're really looking at what that need is. And how do we do that? It might be having agents work to find out from their volunteers, it might be with their youth - just depending on what the program and the process is. But I think that a lot of our needs assessment comes through agents. We work very heavily with that, and I think that's a lot of how our programs work. So, when we have a grant for a computer science program, then it really is based on the needs that we're seeing in the counties or the cities so we're really looking at that data - to pull up to figure out what that is.

A specialist emphasized the role of community partners in assisting with needs assessment because of their connection with target populations in specific communities.

Community groups & meetings - Community groups were also a source of data for needs assessment. One specialist said,

> When I started, I called all the commodity board leaders and asked them for the board [member's] phone numbers. And I called those farmers to ask them what they thought my predecessor had done well and what they needed more attention on. And that's spiraled into really close friendships with a lot of farmers across the state.

Another specialist said,

> I kind of figured out a lot of work with commodity boards. . .. When we go in front of them, or you're a speaker, or you get to attend on behalf of a commodity board, they provide a lot of information with what they're kind of looking for. And other stakeholder groups, whether that be Farm Bureau, serving on Task Force is another really good one, whether it be industry-driven - so it depends on what level.

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So, I've served on state ones for Virginia, like Virginia Food Safety Task Force - that kind of gives you a good idea of where people are coming from, and as well from the regulatory community - there's that back and forth between regulators and stakeholders and Extension."

Agents also referred to local government's role in defining needs. One agent said, "And then just working with local county to see what they need from me. You know, pesticide-wise, things like that. Just having those important relationships all around has really helped me assess the needs." Another agent talked about going to meetings for local boards and organizations to understand community priorities. She said,

What I had to do was go out and talk to people. So, I would listen to, or attend our county board of supervisors meeting and listen to (1) where they were spending their money -where the community's coming from in that setting. (2) I would listen to the school board meetings to find out where they were having issues. I set up meetings with the superintendent and all the principals. I actually went to the VDOE website and looked at the SOL scores for all the schools to see what areas they had that were successful, which areas they were not successful in, so that when I talked to the teachers and to the principals, I knew where I could fill in the gaps to make the connection with the schools. And so that helped a lot. . .. What I do think is really useful is - what everyone else has said - is actually being in real time in meetings with community stakeholders. That's where our department hears the current needs. And you know what we get to really hear is all these different people and their perspective and their needs. And so, we go okay, well, how can we help address these things?

One agent suggested that attending community meetings kept her programming in better alignment with community needs than the VCE Situation Analysis process. She said,

So, I think actually being in community meetings is the most important thing. Hearing from the people when we do our programming, and connecting that to our priorities. So, our priorities should directly align with the needs the community is communicating. We can address that. Let's figure out programming to do that rather than the situational analysis thing.

Another agent spoke about how her work on coalitions suggested new programming directions that the local office was able to further explore through the situation analysis process. She said,

We do use our situational analysis to guide us. And then also, working with other outside groups and coalitions and seeing the needs of the county from a different angle is helpful too. I was on the Community Services Board for several years and looking at folks with mental illness and drug addiction and things that we don't even think about as deeply. Maybe a question or two in our situation analysis that actually seeing the needs of folks with this situation, and that sort of led me to do some programming for folks I probably wouldn't have otherwise. So, being connected with other organizations and coalitions and seeing the needs from different angles.

Direct Interaction in General - Both agents and specialists mentioned relying on direct interaction to ascertain community needs. Agents assess needs through interaction that happens in-person, through email, on farm visits, while attending community events, serving on coalitions, or through program evaluation. An agent said, "I hear my best results from just conversations that happen either through emails or tangibly when I see people." One participant felt people may be more willing to talk in a less formal setting "when you're not necessarily asking like a set group of questions." Agents spoke of talking the Chamber of Commerce members, town office, local businesses, coaches, hospital staff, past partners of the agent they are following in the positions, members of community coalitions, and program participants.

Another agent sees their interactions in the community as part of a two-fold process. She said,

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So, for the methods to access needs [of the] Community - it's kind of a twofold thing. It's one, knowing what resources we have, what we can have access to that's new that's coming out or a new program that's going out. But then it's also talking and seeing and feeling what's going on in the Community. Because, as it's been alluded to before - sometimes the things that we put out in Extension may be great. But it may not be what the community needs at this moment. . . So, it's kind of talking to people, seeing where the situation is, and kind of going from there and then maybe circling back to bring in the things that we're pushing out there that are new in Extension. Circling back or creating a vehicle to interject that in there. And say, 'Hey, we have this too.' But as I said before, we're working for the locality and someday the locality may say that's nice, but this is not what we need to focus on or, this is what not what I need.

Direct interaction is also beneficial in identifying resources that may be used in creating peer mentor groups. An agricultural agent spoke of going to visit producers to learn about new or different things they are doing that they may be willing to share with others. He said, "You might have another call that you can maybe provide advice to another producer with a similar issue. And that also keeps you abreast of different opportunities." This agent went on to say that visiting a farm and seeing what producers need may be more beneficial than asking them to write what they need on an evaluation form. Another agent uses her SERV Safe classes as a sounding board. She said this group normally represents broader community needs rather than focusing on needs they think Extension might address. Yet another agent spoke about how parents at youth programming provide input on their needs.

Direct interaction with clientele to identify needs for specialists happened in person, over Zoom, by phone and email, and on farm visits. A specialist said,

What methods do I use to assess the needs of the community? And in my context, I'm referring to my growers and agents, who are my stakeholders. So, I do communicate with them on a regular basis, in person, which was pre-pandemic - not so much during the pandemic. But there's Zoom, phone calls, email exchanges. So, communication is the way to go about really trying to understanding the needs. I think farm visits are excellent and much needed for the kind of work I do. That's been very helpful to get to know the growers, how they think, and their decision-making skills at a farm. Those are very helpful to me as an extension specialist when I'm trying to come up with recommendations. I want people to know I have their strategies and philosophies in mind. So that has been really helpful. And just having that back and forth communication.

Surveys
Another method of data collection used frequently by agents and specialists was surveys. Agents spoke of using surveys to introduce themselves when they began their new position, as part of the situation analysis process, to follow-up on newsletters, and as part of an evaluation for other programming. Agents distributed surveys online, as paper copies in person, or as postcards. They reported using both Qualtrics and Google forms for online surveys. One agent said,

When I first started, I put together a really elaborate survey introducing myself - the main thing was I'm your new agent, here's my background. And then what would you like to see, and what do you need? What would you like extension to help you with your farms?

Another agent said, "I've also done a paper needs assessment very targeted to the, for example, my beef producer group - a very targeted needs assessment [to identify] what they needed. And that had been very successful for me."

One agent spoke about using a postcard survey to justify programming with elected officials. In addition, he has re-used the survey with different delivery mechanisms to track changes in client needs. He feels this is effective for more general programming. He said,

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My predecessor started, actually before I arrived in the locality, they had some help from the district, and all agents were relatively new in the ag field, and they did this postcard survey. They had these different checkboxes of different ag production things that they wanted some knowledge on. [They were] just mailed out to producers - this postcard of different – you know, click, just check - some of the prioritization is that you have this myriad of issues and send it in. And that provided us really with a good five-year sort of – well, refer back to this postcard survey. And we got a lot of them back really. I think our mailing list was somewhere in the six to seven hundred and we got like 200 of them back. I still have them right above my computer here, and I will pull them out, to kind of go through. It may be something we haven't touched on recently that is important. And the other thing that it did, is it provides us a good reference for our local government. Hey, we did do this survey at this time we had this number of people say they want us to do some programs on this - in case any county administration or supervisors wanted to know why we were doing something versus another. But over time, things change. A lot of those things are probably still there. And we found that because later on when we did the situation analysis we looked at that same format. We changed a few of the boxes. And we didn't have the money to mail it out at that time. So, we handed them out everywhere we could to just get an update. And, overall, just basically - if you had a bar graph of like here's weed control, here's beef production and they just did this in terms of how high priority, they were. And I don't know if I know the best way to look at that, but certainly to me both are important. You need to kind of keep the framework and push both of those out when you can. And we've got something that kind of backs up why we're focusing on, that's excellent for general programs.

Another agent spoke of including a needs-related question on written evaluations for individual programs to identify emerging areas of interest. She said,

To keep an idea on things that are new, I have learned putting a question on any evaluation of what other program would you like to see. I was taught early to try to do that, and whenever I've remembered to put that on an evaluation and was able to hand out the evaluations and get them back…when a sizable program has 15 to 20 or more people that can help and sometimes you do see some common threads of program. Common things that multiple people, not just single people think or single producers that are maybe just in your ear more, but [that] multiple stakeholders feel are important.

Specialists indicated they use surveys with varying success. One specialist said "I think I learned from [experience sending a less successful survey] it" while another emphasized that the feedback, especially in terms of program evaluation helped them improve their "education output." Another specialist used surveys to gauge needs associated with COVID and food security in order to focus their efforts. Finally, another specialist spoke of the importance of partnering with local agents to increase responses. She said,

We do use 4-H Online survey to be able to get some big push on [things] like need and interest. Like when we were moving everything virtually, we sent out a large survey to 4-H families to be able to figure out what are the needs for each family, so there is some chance for some of that large data. But it's always more meaningful and usually more returned if it comes from that local level. So, getting that agent buy-in is probably that key process within that.

Secondary Data
Two specialists spoke about using secondary data to determine their programming needs. However, their content area and geographic coverage appear to shape their process. One specialist said,

We do statewide needs assessments. So, we end up having to rely a lot on secondary data in order to have that be a feasible process. Although we've been requested to get more primary data and we already have some that we actually collect for other purposes. So, we use it in our decision-making, but we're going to be putting it in our official needs assessment. Because our needs assessment is a

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little different because it's a needs assessment [connected to a USDA program], so it's a very specific process.

The second specialist relying on secondary data works in the area of community viability and works more on a local community level. He said,

> So, we don't have [a program area] and . . . It really is a case by case basis. I don't have a statewide constituency because Virginia is very diverse. And so, it's a case by case basis to whether the agent and faculty need something that's going to be very different than if an agent, in Grayson county needs some economic development there. So, I'd really, there isn't like a community needs assessment process, so I just rely on a lot of just data sources. Like looking at this data - from looking at unemployment data, economic data sources, demographic data in terms of quantitative information. Being engaged with various constituency groups like at the state level, whether state agencies or professional associations, like economic development folks can use other folks being very deeply engaged there to sort of generate qualitative information to help shape what to do and how to respond. When I do work with agents in their particular community, I look at situation analyses and light documents, but more updated, like that monthly data or the most recent available information that are out there - it's out there.

From the agent perspective, the secondary data was collected through work with other community organizations that were conducting needs assessment. She felt this was best since participation in the Extension situation analysis process was limited. She said,

> So, some of the methods I use are a couple informal and a couple formal to know the needs of the community. I'm part of a couple community coalitions. And so, a lot of them will be doing surveys and needs assessments throughout the years. Our local hospitals will do a health needs assessment every couple year. A lot of just gathering that data that's already out there and kind of analyzing that instead of recreating the wheel. I also know that when we do our situation analysis we don't necessarily have great participation. So, I tend to use other organizations' data and find that to be the most useful.

Another agent with a very focused program said he provides programming to community partners that contact him with specific needs. Another agent spoke of using data based on calls that the office receives regarding specific pests or issues to determine where he focuses his effort. He said,

> For consumer horticulture, some of the methods that I use for assessing the needs is that I take and aggregate data from our help desk and plant clinic questions and break that down and try to determine what are some of the topics and questions that we are getting and that might be emerging, and maybe I need to provide programming on, or articles and newsletters or social media. Or even when I need to do programming on it. Twig borers, twig girdlers, you know, I could tell you …when we get calls for that or oak gall disease. And so, I've created resources so that when those calls come in, I can point them directly to those. So that's been one of the ways that I do [needs assessment] for consumer horticulture.

Benefits and Challenges of Chosen Methods

Two general challenges related to needs assessment, both identified by agents, were finding resources to address identified community needs at the right time and changing community perceptions of the types of work that Cooperative Extension does. An agent said,

> Most of times where I'm at it's more of a resource and accessibility and also just timing. Like things with the environmental code, right now, and also like RULE and things like that - it plays into when can you get people. Or can you get people you know, like what's their pressing concern at the moment? It may not be coming out to a program at this moment. But they may want the information. at another point in time. . . Right now, I know in our locality, they really, really want technology and.

computer programs. But we just don't have the capability to really reach out to as many people as we could. And it's not on our end. It's just the locality's issues. So, it's a need, but it's something that It's like 'Well if we have a few million dollars, we could solve this.' But we don't. So, it's kind of like well, what can we do in the meantime to kind of meet halfway?

A 4-H agent spoke of getting local communities to recognize that our work extends beyond agriculture. She said,

> In my particular locality, 4-H is really viewed as agricultural-based. And that's because our locality's demographics are agricultural, and the overwhelming needs are agricultural and so forth. I just had a conversation last week with somebody within the school system that didn't know who I was. And said 'Oh, I guess you're on farms, all the time.' And I was like, 'Well actually if you put me on a farm all the time, that would not be comfortable whatsoever.' So, it's just breaking down that barrier sometimes about what can even be offered. What are the possibilities besides just what people already in their minds think?"

Situation Analysis

The situation analysis process VCE uses was primarily mentioned by agents. One agent said "the larger benefit [of the process] was actually talking to people in my counties and figuring out what the needs are and are going to continue to be in the future." Numerous challenges relating to the VCE situation analysis as a method of needs assessment were classified as relating to the underlying philosophy, methodology, and accessibility.

Regarding philosophy, one agent felt the approach limited identification of new initiatives. He said,

> However, I do feel that was kind of a let's just build on what we had before, or how can we modify what we had before, make it kind of still fit into what we're doing so I'm not exactly sure how great of a tool or equipment piece that that is.

Another agent suggested that the situation analysis is used to overcome programming challenges. She said,

> It's [the situation analysis] a hard way to figure out what the needs really are, who's needing it, why they're needing it. But hopefully that's, again with evaluation and education design, it all kind of follows into a circle. So, if you're not doing educational design very good and your evaluation isn't that great, then you're like, 'Oh, where's our situation analysis, and are we covering all of our areas?'

Another challenge related to the underlying philosophy of the situation analysis process as a form of needs assessment reported by agents was that it does not cover all program areas. One agent said,

> I don't feel like the results from our county match what I do. Because I am a little more narrow [focus]. And so, the average person in the county, especially with the disconnects that we have from agriculture now, they're not going to say that their needs are related to what do I spray my cabbage with for x. So, I'm not in our situation analysis. So, it isn't really reflecting the programming that I need to be doing as a whole. I mean, there are pieces that match. But it's just a little harder to pull from [the agriculture] census, and from other situation analysis, and from other people's research, to guide what I'm doing. So, I guess, in a nutshell, I need help.

Another agent said,

> I don't think the situation analysis was beneficial, especially with us and FNP. It is such a small [number of] people I think. Like we have 20 people respond for our county and our situation analysis, and we send it out to like 2000 or something. So, it also- it's not my target area. So even the needs

that do come from that - I can't even help those people. Just because of the restrictions of our grant. And I think that's my challenge.

Another agent said that as a multi-county agent they were not involved in the situation analysis process. She said,

I wasn't involved in the situational analysis development for my particular county that I'm actually housed in, or any of the counties that I served, since I serve multiple count[ies]. So, I feel like that I would have liked to have been involved in that process and understand where the information for those reports came from.

Representation, relevance, and frequency were the main issues identified related to methodology. Several agents felt that only a small segment of their communities participated in the process. In some cases, the audiences participating in the process were already connected with Extension, so were not providing new insight. One agent said,

I think one of the problems with that we've seen in creating our situational analysis is getting to the entire Community. The feedback we get is from 4-H parents and others that are already involved in our programming. So, it's hard to get that opinion or feedback from everyone in your county. So, I think that's one thing we really need to work on. There are ways to get that done a little bit better.

Another agent said,

For me, the situation analysis is almost useless because it's just such a small group of people, and focusing on those people who already know about VCE or that we already are in contact with. We're not getting that full scope of the needs of the whole community.

Agents spoke of having only ten respondents in one case, and a response rate of 20 from a mailing that went to 2000 residents. The process is very time consuming to not yield good results. An agent said,

So, it's okay if we go in, and 10 people respond to this and those 10 people are a captive audience. That means nothing. But we've just spent a bunch of time doing this. So, we did what we're required to do with situational analysis. Right? I get that. I don't put as much stock into that because I just don't think it's accurate. I think it's pointless.

Representation and purpose, accompanied with frequency, relate to challenges identified by the agents associated with relevance of the data collected by the situation analysis process. An agent questioned who the process is really intended to benefit. He said,

But putting all this time and effort into this pretty nebulous process of creating a situational analysis that's not really for us; it doesn't feel like- it feels like it's really for Blacksburg. And then, we don't often look at that in the five years after we've created it, because maybe it's no longer relevant, or maybe the data itself wasn't helpful.

Another agent referred to the five-year timeline saying,

I think if we could do like these focus groups like we're doing right now. But that takes a long time. And by six months, then you got to program plan – Is it still a need? So, I think meeting the need when it's expressed, because then the needs are going to change. I think our current situation analysis is great, but it's only done every five years. So, by the time that five years is done, what's happening in the meantime?

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There were two primary challenges associated with accessibility of situation analysis reports. One agent reported coming into the system and not being able to find a report posted for her location. Another said the reports were very long and challenging to read and understand the community needs.

Listening

A specialist shared the benefits of using listening as a method of needs assessment. She said,

> I think the benefits, since I do it sort of informally, is I do build a lot of one on one relationships with folks. And so that when they do have new challenges they can reach out to me. And if it's not my area of expertise, I try and link them up with an organization or someone else who could hopefully help them. Like I said, I think doing a more formal assessment and not just having it come piecemeal as they're running into challenges but sitting down with them and asking them to think about their organizational goals and things like that could be useful.

Another specialist spoke of how interacting with one person might indicate problems more systemic to the industry. She said,

> You develop those relationships and so that provides a nice, direct line of communication. Really intimately, you at least know what that individual growers' needs are. But generally, I think I found that that's pretty well reflective of - if one person has this problem, a lot of people probably do. But, building those relationships is really a nice benefit to try to assess the needs of the community.

A second specialist questioned the need for a more formal needs assessment approach. He said,

> I kind of knew that I needed to do this, but until my Extension review, I think, like others I realized that they really want it to be pretty formal - is helpful. But at the same time, it's like 'Well if I was brought in to be the subject matter expert and I'm out there, I'm talking to growers, you can see that in all these Extension, my contacts reporting and my number of presentations, all these metrics. Like, I'm out there. And this is what I say the needs are - then just trust me.' I mean, I don't know that there's like - I don't feel like I can say that doesn't cut it. Like I need the soybean board to say, 'You know, [the specialist] was supposed to be doing it, wasn't doing this, and he did it, and it was super great.' I'm like they weren't from like a third party, which I get. But- [I also don't think its trusting your employees to do their job. [This] is something that we could be better and I don't know, maybe that's on VCE or if that's more on like that tenure process kind of thing again there.

Yet other professionals found a challenge in this approach to needs assessment because of experiences where what one person identified as a need was not reflective of the community. A specialist said,

> That's [one-on-one conversations] really time consuming. If I were to collect personal accounts from every single person, that can take a ridiculous amount of time. And then I still wouldn't be able to capture if that is just that one grower, if it's multiple growers, if there's enough of a need to justify having a large program or just a one on one with that person, I need to find somehow a balance of how to capture everyone's thoughts, while also not losing the connection that you have when you're just having face to face conversations.

An agent shared an experience she had where she thought she was addressing a community need with very limited results. She said,

> I even had several people that have reached out and wanted a workshop with public speaking, and I had probably had a dozen different messages from different people. A different wide variety of people had asked input about -our program. Helping you know when it should be, should it be in a certain part of that area. I had asked all those questions, set it up and I had two people sign up. And I was like, well I'm not offering programs to two people - it's just not worth my time. I can't justify that

much of a commitment. But I think people are just pulled in so many directions that finding the good fit is hard.

An agent spoke about how "listening" may not identify smaller needs. He said,

Benefits and challenges associated with this is that I probably am missing some of the smaller needs, or the more specific needs, or the niche market needs. And that's something that I'm personally working on is trying to get into those smaller markets of livestock and how I can better assess them.

Similarly, another agent expressed concern about not being able to meet the needs identified by clients. He said, "If you can't solve their problem quickly, people can become frustrated."

Some professionals mentioned both benefits and challenges associated with informal listening to identify community needs. One agent spoke of this in reference to having grown up in the community in which she serves. This may present potential for some people to receive preferential treatment. She said,

I feel like we tend to do a lot of more informal needs assessment. But we are also a small county. And I am a lot different than [another participating agent] because I live here and I grew up here in school. I came back. So, that presents some benefits. But then, sometimes it does present challenges. Because I know people well enough that I might be more apt to meet their needs than someone else's. So, I think that sometimes that all is good and bad.

Another agent spoke of feeling "disconnected" from their community because they do not live in the locality they serve. The agent said,

My disconnect is probably a bit unique, but I don't live in the locality that I serve. So, I personally often feel a bit disconnected. Just because, in my everyday life, I might not encounter those people that I'm serving. So those conversations don't just happen organically. And if they don't know me, they don't know me.

A specialist spoke of getting mixed data when using informal listening through agents to collect data. She said,

Some of the benefits [are] you can get some really good data from county agents. Some of the challenges are you can get some really bad data from county agents. And so, it's really like a case-by-case basis. Some are more responsive than others. Some of them have a really good feel for their community and have really good stakeholders in their communities. Others are still working on that process. And so, I think it really just depends on that area.

Another specialist spoke of the time investment required for gathering primary data, but also presented a solution. She said,

But the benefits and challenges associated with the methods - it's always a mix of how much time we want to put into collecting primary data, because the more data you collect the more of a huge project it is. And then you have the best data, and you can make some really great decisions moving forward. So, I think it's always just what capacity do we have? And we do really rely heavily on student labor really for that and make use of graduate students, which can be really helpful to conduct these needs assessments as long as you can frame it in terms of thesis or dissertation.

This was echoed by an agent who attended a multitude of community meetings to identify where money was being spent and issues being addressed in the school system. She said,

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And then I was told to get involved in the community organizations. So, I joined the Farm Bureau women's committee, and anything else - the fair Committee, and all these things. But that quickly consumed my life. And I'm like this is my job. It is not my life. And so, I slowly have been pulling back to reclaim my time with that. But that's how I have continued to assess the needs of my community is to keep those channels open and keep those doors open. There are lots of benefits with that, but the challenge is this - you get spread thin and you don't have a lot of personal time when you're running from meeting to meeting to meeting to just listen and hear and be a part of but also to share. It's time consuming. So, work took over too much of my life. My personal life.

Finally, a specialist shared concerns about not being able to work with people she does know, and then also people contacting her, just because they have a relationship with her, even if that isn't the proper channel or they have questions outside her area of expertise. She said,

The challenges associated with that is I do get associated with those farmers. I could potentially be missing a lot of folks that don't have that close personal relationship with me, and if they're in a county where they don't have an Extension agent or an agribusiness professional that works closely with me. I might as well not exist. Another challenge is, because I'm so well-known I'm assumed to be [specific subject matter specialist] for the state of Virginia, in any freaking capacity you can imagine. So, my phone just rings off the hook. And I could be like, 'Dude, you're really supposed to call the [another specific subject matter] guy. But he didn't pick up the phone. So of course, you're going to call me.

Advisory Groups
The agent who spoke about her Livestock Steering Committee said they provide an opportunity "to talk it out with them honestly, and having those expectations be communicated openly and honestly." One agent talked about limitations in personnel as a challenge to addressing needs with an advisory group. She said, "I'm only one person. So, addressing all of those needs is challenging sometimes because I'm not an expert in all those areas. I'm just one person." Another agent expressed concern related to who is not included in the advisory groups. She said, "Challenges? It's maybe not getting at what individual people need. I think it's important to connect with individual stakeholders, especially underrepresented populations, and that's hard to do." Another challenge identified was not catching "on to pertinent issues in the community, and somebody else might catch on faster than I did. So, lack of being up to date."

Program Teams
A specialist who uses a program team as their advisory group expressed the challenge in doing this by saying, "You know, it can be hit or miss. Because it depends on how many people are engaged in your program team and how responsive they are. And our program team does stuff like send out surveys to all the FCS agents to say, 'So we've got an idea we think this is good.' We send out a Qualtrics and say 'Is this where you guys are at?' And if they respond, then we know. But it's a hit or miss - right? If they don't respond, they may have another opinion and we just don't know it."

Survey
The benefit associated with using surveys for needs assessment provided by one agent "are that I can get a quick program done. If I get you several responses from a survey that 'I want to know more about straw bale gardening.' I can get a quick program done on straw bale gardening."

The challenge identified by the specialist in sending surveys to the program team also is a challenge with agents sending surveys in their communities. Response rates are often small. One agent suggested this might be a result of people being "really screen fatigued" due to overuse of virtual technology associated with COVID. Another challenge can be not knowing who is responding so the professional can address a programming need to a specific audience. One agent suggested the demographics of the respondents they had may be skewed. She said,

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But the problem that I saw with the surveys, and we see this on a lot of the focus groups and things that I sit on in our community - is it's the same group of people in the community who tend to respond to those surveys. So, you're not necessarily getting that wide swath of a lot of different viewpoints. You're getting - in our situation - it was more predominant, higher educated, more professional work type situation. And so, to me it was kind of skewed and we didn't necessarily get the responses from the people in the community, who we really want to hear from.

Another challenge associated with surveys in a paper format was having funding to mail them. Internet surveys eliminate mailing costs, but may not reach some audiences. An agent said,

I know, in a time of COVID, I'm with everybody on the cell service internet issue. While my particular house, just like in the last year, got an upgrade in the system, a lot of people still don't have anything at all - cell phone or internet. And it could be that it's there, but then we have income issues where can you afford to have Internet. So, it might be there and available, but can our stakeholders afford it?

Another agent spoke of internet service being "nonexistent" ten minutes outside of town. Yet another agent spoke about how online surveys skew the demographics of the audience they reach. She said, "I will say that sometimes my online - I definitely don't hit those true producers. I hit more of the homeowner - homesteader. [You get] some very interesting programs that just aren't realistic or within the realm of Extension."

A primary challenge raised by a couple of the specialists related to using surveys to conduct a needs assessment was not knowing how to write survey questions. One specialist said,

You know, benefits and challenges of those are . . . [I] haven't done a survey before. So, you know your first attempt at anything's not going to be your best effort. Oh, there was a class - a one-hour lunch workshop I took on surveys. And that was really helpful. Haven't done a survey since then. But I think I'll be better prepared for next time. But certainly, a challenge in the needs assessment is - this is our first time doing it right, so we don't know what we're doing for the for the most part.

Another specialist not only had challenges with writing questions, but also analyzing the findings and connecting it to her educational design. She said,

I don't know how to write survey questions. I got the answers back. And like yeah, I worded this pretty poorly. So maybe I should have tested that survey a little bit better. But that was helpful - my survey had two parts. One was what do you want to focus on? But then also the other part, was how do you want to hear it? And maybe that gets back to the communication or the educational design and sort of haven't got around to doing this yet- but I've been working on trying to develop that into a publication kind of here and there. There's no deadline on this, and so it's one of those things. . . Oh, but one thing I definitely learned was or at least I can't find a lot of literature on what is a good way to present, like we mentioned, information that actually connects to know that they respond to. So, it's kind of interesting, that big hit on something kind of accidentally. Although I don't think I really have any found it useful there either, at least in terms of the survey.

Similarly, an agent questioned how to interpret declining response rates. She said,

One thing that I found when I started, I send out a newsletter. And so, I do a Google form and a Google survey once a year. It's online. I will say I'm getting a whole lot fewer responses mailed than I was in the beginning. So, hopefully, that means that I am doing a good job and that people that are just happy with the programs, that I am putting on.

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Focus Groups & Secondary Data

The primary challenge identified with using focus groups in the needs assessment was the time required to collect and analyze the data. Having data that was already collected was a benefit expressed in using secondary data. An agent said, "When you look at existing reports, you don't have to collect the data. You just analyze the data, and given how small our staff is, I'm sure they [other agencies collecting data] have more people and resources to gathering that information so it's probably more accurate."

Connection Between Needs Assessment Findings and Unit or Departmental Extension Priorities

More agents indicated that their needs assessment findings connected to their unit priorities than did not. One agent attributed to the broad nature of the situational analysis goals. She said, "You know, as we talked about with the situation analysis, we try to make everything tie up to those fairly broadly so just about everything that I do, I can broadly fit into those situational analysis goals."

FNP agents felt there was strong correlation between their needs assessments and unit priorities because of their subject matter area. An FNP agent emphasized the connection between her work and food security issues across multiple counties. She said,

> I would say that the analyses align fairly well. I mean, for each county, a large need is food security and that's a big thing that we focus on within FNP. So, I would say, there is a large connection there and then from the community members and partners, stakeholders again it's food security. A large part of my work is working with a Food Council in [town name] so that's been helpful.

Similarly, another agent shared,

> I'm able to follow up with certain people based on what's found in the needs assessment. Almost always the findings are connecting to the priorities that we have, through Extension and SNAP-ED - obesity and physical inactivity and food insecurity. They're always top priorities and a lot of these needs assessments and it definitely connects directly with what we're doing as far as what VCE could provide.

Two agents spoke about how relationships in the office relate to this connection. One agent spoke how working closely with other subject matter agents in the county provided this. He said,

> Needs assessment connected to my unit? So anytime- and that goes back to just the dynamic within our office and in our unit- we work really well together. And I helped my crops agent on a lot of his crops programming, even if it's just assisting with sign-in and distribution of paperwork. And I'll tell you that what that does is -anybody that I'm missing on that smaller market that may have some livestock but primarily goes to him for crops needs, that gives me the opportunity to start that conversation. We work together really well within our office to be able to network and to assist each other. And anytime the 4-H agent goes out and has any kind of conversations with somebody, you know, with a kid that's interested in getting into something livestock related, she immediately pulls me in. So, I feel like that connects really well within our department and the priorities within the department, because we really do pride ourselves in working together.

The second agent sensed a disconnect between unit priorities and needs assessment because programs were siloed. She said,

> I feel like my department Extension priorities are definitely being met. Unit [priorities] I'm not so much sure, because … my unit that I am housed in the other agents tend to definitely be more in their own silo and they don't do as much unit programming.

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Agents indicated that the needs assessment did not fit with their unit or department priorities because their position was narrowly focused or due to their expertise or funding limitations. An agent said this question made her wonder if her position fit with the community where she is located. She said

> And even though it seems kind of ironic, our situation analysis - I was around when we did it - but most of the needs that are in it are either FCS, like family consumer sciences based or agricultural based. Which I could find programs for you, that fit into those two areas. But again, that's not my subject matter area - that I feel comfortable in. So then, like where do I fit? Do I have to change what I feel like I can best draw from our community to fit that need? Or do I fit better somewhere else? And I think that sometimes, you know? Did I get placed in the right position with Extension, or the right locality? I think I'm in the right position, but am I in the right locality for what my skill set best fits the needs or with somebody with more 'But your agricultural background fits better in my locality.'

Another agent spoke of the challenges in meeting local needs while abiding by grant restrictions. She said,

> So, it also- it's not my target area. So even the needs that do come from that - I can't even help those people, just because of the restrictions of our grant. And I think that's my challenge – it is like when someone does come into our office and says 'Hey, I have a nutrition program. I need someone to do it.' I immediately go, 'So, like are these low income? And like, where are they at?' I have to look at either a census tract that qualifies or- it sucks. Like when like a school reaches out to me for a program, but they're 49%, they're not the 50%. I can't even help that school because the 1% off. It's really frustrating, you know? Especially if, all the third graders qualify - still can't help them, because the overall school doesn't meet the 50% of free [and] reduced lunch. So, like that's really frustrating because there could be a potential program right there - that there is a need, but I still can't do it. So, I think that's my big challenge and that's why even like where I'm housed, I can't do much in my housing unit, just because like my counties, that county doesn't qualify. So, I feel like it's weird they're housing me, but I can barely do anything for them so that's really frustrating. But I think that's pretty much it, just like the challenges of meeting the needs when it's dropped right in your lap and they technically qualify, but our grant restricts us.

One agent suggested that COVID actually connected their work more with local needs because the needs changed to be more manageable in a single-agent county.

While some specialists were emphatic that the issues they work on are needs-based, there seemed to be less connection between needs assessment and the work that was conducted. Sometimes the challenges were competing priorities such as departmental foci or funding to achieve tenure. Many specialists emphasized that their work was more directed by their area of expertise and doing what they feel is best for the industries or communities they serve. One specialist summed this up, saying,

> Like [another specialist in the group], I only do a project when I see the need. And there's certainly a lot more needs than I have money or time to devote towards. I think, [yet another specialist in the group] said it best when is autonomy that attracted us to these jobs and I like to point out to my colleagues a lot, I could look at parasites of slug, like slime, and the universities don't care as long as I'm bringing in million-dollar grants. So, me taking care of my farmers - yes, it's supposed to be part of the job. . .. It's what I enjoy in the job, but I don't think I get any kind of career advancement from it. I really don't think it matters that much for my tenure promotion. I think it's all about how much money I earned [for the university or department].

One specialist saw this as both a benefit and a challenge. She said,

> For quite a while, and probably still, I'm not sure what I'm doing with Extension. I'm just doing what I like doing and my department seems to like it. And our animal community seems to appreciate it. But I didn't ever get a lot of guidance on those things, and I think that could have been helpful. I try and

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seek people out in my department to ask them like 'What should I be doing? What does this look like?' And I got some tidbits. But I didn't ever get a big vision of this is sort of what it should look like. I think one of the things that was challenging was that I did have a very different Extension program from what others have done. And so, it was sort of left up to me, which was, on the one hand, really nice. They said, "Do what you want to do." And on the other hand, I would have liked a little, sort of framework of "this is how other people's programs look. This is how they've been developed". So, I think my department's happy with it. I didn't necessarily get any really nailed down priorities that "You need to be meeting these goals."

Another specialist suggested that Extension priorities are vague in order to accommodate a wide range of activities. He said,

I don't know that our department or unit has great Extension priorities, as far as they're just sort of so vaguely defined. Anything I do fits in there. So, I guess they connect really well and also really poorly at the same time. Because I could literally do anything, and it would fit. Right? Which I get it - it's by design, so that they can lump it all in there for reporting and stuff.

Partnering with agents individually or through program teams was presented as a way to meet the needs of target populations. A specialist changed the question a bit to reflect different types of interactions and program teams. She said

"How do I connect with my unit or my department? We've been doing semester retreats where we have been now getting together via Zoom, but sometimes in person. It's really good for team building. We can kind of see what we're all doing. We've spent significant effort trying to build into the program team. . .. We're sort of under a very large program team and we've now divided off and we've actually - we were sort of focusing on food safety and then we through meeting with our department and pairing what that unit or our department unit wants, and then how that fits in with the program with all the agents. We've actually expanded that now to safe and high-quality food. So, it's like we're doing food safety, but we're also doing food quality. It brings in more people together and [another specialist in the group] mentioned how important some of the program teams can be. And then, of course, that leads us to better impact statements."

VCE Resources to Support Needs Assessment

Focus group participants were asked to identify what VCE could do to support them with needs assessment. Recommendations included programming across program areas or locations, providing training, and mechanisms for increasing the reach of the situation analysis process, identifying personnel to assist in this area, increasing support of program teams, and making changes to evaluation and tenure processes.

Programming across program areas or locations

An agent said "I would love to see VCE encourage more cross-programming and encouraging agents to step outside of their silo and work together on some cross-programming." Specialists talked about the different needs assessments that are taking place and how they might be shared more effectively. One specialist said,

So, this is an interesting question. Extension has their own needs assessment process that they go through every five years. Right? Although I have not been directly involved in that at all. And even the most recent assessment - I haven't been privy to the findings. They may be out there, somewhere. But I don't know where are they or that I should be looking at them.

Participants expressed the need for a "structure" and "holistic approach" that helps determine appropriate methods to be used and to identify and share data at local and state levels. Another specialist suggested the need is more to be able to collate and share data across the state. He said,

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And as far as assistance with the needs assessment - I'm not actually sure what that could look like. We tend to actually think 'I kind of like our needs assessment, I think we do a pretty good job.' So, I'm not sure about getting outside assistance for that. Except that if there would be a way to collate data or to pull it together, so we have, I mean if there are agents across the state, and if there are a lot of - there's a specialist system working - then it'd be nice that if there is data out there, that we could perhaps be able to help each other, a little easier to pull together needs assessments. But once again, we do a statewide needs assessment. So, I'm not sure if that's always helpful if someone works on a county basis. But it might be helpful for folks in this capacity.

Another agent spoke of using VT and VSU connections to strengthen needs assessment in highly populated areas, such as Northern Virginia. She said,

We have so many powerful Virginia Tech partners, especially in the northern district who would really magnify us and sort of expand our reach, I think if, like a class wanted to take on a project and do some really robust data analysis or even Virginia Tech wanted to send out a survey to all of their partners. They just have a much bigger footprint than we do, and I think it's a shame that we're not connecting as much as we should. I think that goes back to what [another focus group participant] was saying about a disconnect between Virginia Tech and Virginia Cooperative Extension and Virginia State, too. But specifically, in super Northern district - Virginia Tech has a bigger footprint there.

Training

Professional development training on relationship building was the most frequently cited need by agents in the focus groups. One agent responded she needed, "Just some more training and professional development, on how to, I guess, build some of those relationships with stakeholders. And how to make them last or maybe broaden into other areas that we may not deal with on a day to day basis."

Other agents said training on how to identify who they are missing in their needs assessment process would be beneficial. An agent said, "I think VCE providing different means of assessment- new and creative ways to reach broader audiences to get a more true picture of assessment and needs in the community." Building on relationships to assess impact was also identified as a training need.

Another agent expressed interest in learning how to develop an advisory group. He said, "I forget who mentioned - 4-H. I think it was [another focus group participant] had some advisory groups. How do you develop that group? How do you formulate who is part of it? What are you really looking for?" Need for training related to data analysis was also identified.

Agents expressed interest in needs assessment methods that were less formal and timelier than the situation analysis process. An agent said

What could be provided? I think, maybe some more training on formal needs assessment and informality. You know there's got to be a way to document these informal needs assessments that we're doing. And just like the other individuals pointed out - that situational analysis, I just don't know what to do with that. And like it was pointed out that those needs might have existed five years ago, but very clearly our community needs are going to completely change as what we have been through the past year. So just what do we do with that? How much is going to be placed on that situational analysis as we move forward with our program?

One agent expressed interest in tools that would help him conduct more informal needs assessment processes. He said,

Maybe how to develop some of those more informal methods of needs assessments, rather than the broad formal [methods] . . . Do I set up a table at a farmers market and not really answer anybody's

questions but try to get a needs assessment? Do I do that? Do I go to local mall? I've been told we've got a big Indian cinema program here. Do I set up a table outside that group and do a needs assessment and see what that community [needs]? How do we do some of these more informal, rather than like a situational analysis? Or even how to pull together some of my partners?

Interest in learning by observing others needs assessment processes was shared by an agent and specialist. The agent said,

Tools, techniques, ideas. What is my district director doing? That was one of the questions that I posed to her during my evaluation. She does a really good job, don't get me wrong, but I don't know her goals. I don't know what her methods of needs assessment are. And just building that conversation, and the same thing with further on up - not necessarily all the way to the top. Because I feel like that 3000-foot view isn't necessarily effective when you're down here on the ground- but just new techniques and new ways of assessing information.

A specialist said,

I would love to have a workshop to hear how other folks do this. And I know they'll be in different fields, from me. But I'd love to see their tools and their instruments that they use - what they found to work. All of that, I think that would be really useful. Like I said, after my Extension review they're like, 'You're partnering well with the community here. Have you done a formal assessment?" It's like, 'No. I didn't know I need to do that' So I think that would be really great.

A specialist suggested a tool that could be used by agents and specialists to identify appropriate needs assessment and evaluation questions. He said,

I think having sort of a generalized tool for some of the key questions you can ask if you are a new specialist would be helpful. So, each specialist, regardless of their background, or even agent, regardless of their background, can replace some of the keywords that are relevant to their subject matter and use some of the same toolkit. And that really comes down to the leadership and what they need, or what are they asked for from the federal government. So, they need to pay more attention to what is the federal government asking us, and then kind of build your toolkit based on that that they can share with their employees so, they can do a better job targeting and focusing on the questions that are most relevant to the Cooperative Extension system.

Same thing with evaluations, I mean there have been so many workshops and trainings that we are all involved with. But we focus on the real content that's to be delivered. But oftentimes, in the last half hour, we try to come up with a set of questions we need to ask the audience. And that really is not the best way to go about it. You know as I'm learning, of course I think early on, but that may not be the best way to go about it. I think we need to have better articulation and better uniformity in terms of what are we doing with all these things and what is our end goal.

Another specialist suggested training related to Institutional Review Board (IRB) processes would be helpful.

Personnel
Two specialists suggested that VCE might provide contact people to assist both in needs assessment and development of impact statements. The first specialist said,

But if you're the only small fruit person or you're the only vegetable person on campus, or even off campus, then who would be your go-to person? So that, I think, has been somewhat of a challenge, I would say, initially, and I still don't know if my methodology is the perfect one. I just know it works in my case, and I wouldn't say 100% because I'm not yet tenured, but it seems like it is working,

A second specialist said,

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They could pay someone to do it. You know, that's one of the balls I let drop. I write crappy impact statements, because that's the time of year, where I'm like I'm super busy. And no one's ever said to me, 'You wrote a crappy impact statement.' And I've kind of learned in the past five years what things I can half ass on. So, what's the assessment- needs assessments - but needless paperwork surveying I've come to half ass on. And I apologize, but I really, really do think my accessibility and familiarity and popularity with the farming community makes me in touch with most their needs. There could just be someone missing.

Program Support

One specialist recommended that VCE "continue supporting the program teams." Another specialist recommended determining whether or not the community viability program is going to be a part of VCE. He said,

> And then what VCE can do, quite frankly, is actually think through what VCE commitment to community viability and economic development is going to be. If there's going to be programming, then redevelop it. Because we have 4-H - it's a very solid program. We have the FNP program and it's very solid. It's got a lot of support - and then you got your ANR and FCS as partners - a lot of agents. You know what they're doing. But in terms of community viability, it is really haphazardly done in Extension. . .. You know there's no effort to really build this - I think what VCE could do is either decide we are going to commit to this or not. And if we're not going to commit to it, help us figure out what that means for our individual positions.

Another specialist suggested simplifying the Extension review process. He said,

> Oh, I guess, I will say that I think that Extension review was pretty helpful. . .. I don't know that the way it was implemented - it was pretty laborious for everybody involved. Like we couldn't instead of like me drawing up a whole dossier and providing and then having to call stakeholders, and all this. We probably could have just sat down and had a good conversation about it and got the same output. But it was a helpful process. I think there's probably ways to improve upon it, but I got a lot out of that.

Time

Agents and specialists alike expressed need for time to process the needs assessments and then plan accordingly. An agent said,

> I think we need more time to kind of go over the situational analyses to really get to know our communities. Because I think we're kind of pressured to start and just dive right into programming. I know, for me, I really need time to sit down and learn my counties, I'm still learning them. I think it's going to be at least two years before I even know everything that I need to know. VCE just needs to allow us to really have some time to learn our needs versus just 'okay, well you started now. go ahead, implement everything that you possibly can.'"

Another agent emphasized the potential impact this might provide, saying,

> There is no encouragement or incentive to take the time to plan effectively because that doesn't generate numbers. Right? So, we are asked constantly to do programming because we have to do programming for numbers and getting at 'What's your impact?' But from an agent's perspective, there is very little return on investment to sit down and take the time to plan effective programming. To go to these sort of meetings too- because what impact statement am I going to write about? It's probably going to be, 'Well yeah that's great. You went to a bunch of community meetings and you learned what the needs are. But yeah you should already know that. You should have been doing programming. And where are the numbers for the program?' I think if we were encouraged- and I think this is probably a common theme that we've heard. I think that we are encouraged to go a mile wide and an inch deep. But if we were encouraged by district directors and by the state to go, 'Okay

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as a department, we are giving you the freedom to do less programming and to actually plan together. What is the strategic plan for what you're doing? How is what your programming, you know, in the next year or two years - what is that going to look like, and how is that going to impact the needs that are currently in your community?' But oftentimes, we're just doing programming because we're being told to do more programming, and hoping that that someone liked it, that our District Director goes 'Great, you've done these numbers. That's good. Let's move on.' I wish we were encouraged to think about it in a more systematic way, within our department, within our county. And sit down and then that was what we were evaluated on. You did all this work to figure out the needs, you went to these meetings, you did this. Now, you know the needs and you can implement this. That is awesome. That is going to really have an impact - long term. But there's no time for that, because I need numbers now for my impact report at the end of the year. So, I think that's what VCE can do is just think about it, and encourage us to repeatedly plan for our unit and give us time to do that, rather than just running on the treadmill and hoping that it will.

Another agent suggested that agents need sabbaticals to dig into local needs and develop potential solutions. She said,

What can VCE provide to assist you with needs assessments? Sabbatical. That's what they could do. You know, professors take sabbatical. We need to take a sabbatical. We move from programming to assessment to evaluation to awards at the same time we're doing programming. And when you're so busy being busy, you can't see what's happening. And so, I think if we could be given an opportunity to take even a month or two-month sabbatical, especially after we do a community needs assessment and we get that data in, we need time to just aggregate that data - to look at what can we do in the unit office.

And you can't do that and focus on that when you're busy being busy. If they would implement even a two-month sabbatical for us to literally observe- to just go throughout our communities, talk to people, and observe, and that's it. And then come back together, talk about what we observe, talk about it and then put some unit plans in place for how each one of us can break that down and do it without being pulled in all these different directions to do busy stuff. It would be nice to be able to apply for two- or three-month sabbatical because we can get so busy doing stuff that we lose sight of the bigger picture. And we have international programs that I never feel like I can take a part in, and it gives you such a different perspective on everything and how you can find other immersive experiences to bring back to that community. But you can't do it when you are always busy, busy, busy, busy. I would love to have the opportunity to take a two to three-month sabbatical. I can go and explore other places, find out sister cities that have problems, and do a community study here and there and then bring that back. And say, 'Wow guys, listen.' It gives you everything, and I wish Extension would do that.

Similarly, a specialist suggested acknowledgement of the time and resources required to do Extension work. She said,

I think, support for these, the one-on-one interactions or the direct grower or stakeholder communication can be better, both in terms of money to do it. Right? Blacksburg is like three hours from everywhere. And also, just our administrators wanting us to do it, you know? Like, I've heard some of them say, I can't believe you guys are driving that much. And it's like, well I mean, I know we're phoning everything in right now. You have to. But I just don't feel like you're going to develop a relationship or someone's actually going to change their livelihood and their business practices if you're just phoning it in. Right? And so, some support, both in terms of money and realizing that extension takes time. [If VCE] would want you to take that time to do it, I think, would be to be helpful there.

Research Team Reaction

Themes related to the research team's responses to this part of the focus groups fall into five areas. They are, discussion related to the differences between agents and specialists related to needs assessment, the VCE situational analysis process, and the ability of Extension to respond quickly to emerging needs.

Differences Between Agents and Specialists

In general, the VCE situation analysis process is used by agents for needs assessment in the local communities. Specialists generally have a research expectation and tend to have their needs assessments driven by grant opportunities. A member of the research team said,

> With big organizations that work smoothly; it's because they're usually top down. Right? There's one chief, like Ed Jones, says "blah." And we're all going to do the same thing. Well the Extension model is not really that. We're supposed to be grassroots-ground up. So, locality A says this is priority and in whatever, and then of course 10 localities may say 'Hey we have an issue with the, the price of beef" or something. Well, these specialists may have had a grant there that comes down from the top, that says, we're going to work on water quality. And the producer is like I'm worried about price, and they're worried about it from the top down. It's like water quality. And so, then, how do you do it? That creates a little bit of stress, because you have these divergent or maybe not always divergent, but I mean you just have a lot of things to - like say which one is more important sometimes is going to be individual decision-making. They create stress. But I don't know what to do about it.

Another member of the research team suggested the researchers may solve this issue by combining the grant proposal with what they are hearing from the field. He said, "A lot of times, RFPs will come out and the researchers have to kind of target to those a little bit. But really, maybe I'm a little closer related to the ARECs and all, but a good researcher will take what they hear from their clients in the field and kind of work that into the RFP, if they can. And combine the on-the-ground-needs with whatever the funding sources is done and for the same time."

VCE Situational Analysis Process

The research team was surprised to hear concerns related to the situation analysis process. An agent said, "I was surprised and I don't know if it came up in the other [focus group sessions] or not, but I was surprised at the number of mid-career agents who felt that the situation analysis that we do was useless and wasn't done appropriately in their units. It may not have been done appropriately in their units, but we get an awful lot of training on how to do a situation analysis correctly." This was echoed in concerns from members of the research team as follows:

● In our focus group there were, it was mixed - some people found the needs assessment helpful, but a large number said it was completely useless. That it hadn't been done correctly. It had data which wasn't helpful and was totally not of use and that surprised me a lot.

● They didn't think the situation analysis was maybe as accurate or whatever as it could be. That maybe, there was a smaller sample size that kind of fed the situation analysis and that there is more stuff out there.

● It is just like any other model. It's only as good as the inputs. So, this was probably somebody who came along after a previous situation analysis had already been done, so they'll get their chance.

Another member of the research team suggested the process more important than the end result. She said,

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I find it a very valuable tool. And it's not so much the end result that's so valuable, but it's the process of what we go through to get the information that is the most valuable for me. I feel like there's a disconnect with those.

Responding to Emerging Needs

Members of the research team echoed what they heard in the focus groups related to the ability of VCE agents and specialists to adapt quickly when confronted with the COVID pandemic. A member of the research team said,

I was just thinking about how we changed everything so quickly, how we turned on a dime and actually got some of those educational programs out there where needed, and actually had to revamp to actually get COVID information out. I can't speak for anybody else, but I know I was sending out - between text messages and emails to our clientele and stuff - I was sending out somewhere and strategically hitting a bunch of folks, over 100, somewhere around 150 a week. There for a while, "Just try and please share with your family, please share with others." That kind of stuff and how that ripple effect did. But just look how quickly all that changed on a dime and how we adapted. Because I think it was earlier in the conversation we had, there's one thing that you can always count on in Extension and that's change. They say we get in a rut, but how quickly have some of us had to turn on a dime to get something done. I see 4-H agents doing, yes, they do a lot of the same program year after year. But long gone are the days, where you had the four posters, now it's PowerPoint presentations and videos and blogs, and I mean it's different, and they've changed. So, some of us went kicking and screaming this year, with COVID, I'm saying and I admit I'm one of them.

Research Team Recommendations

The research team provided recommendations to improve the VCE Situational Analysis Process and related to ongoing needs assessment methods.

VCE Situational Analysis Process

The research team had several recommendations related to the VCE situation analysis process. One member of the team noted that there was a need to provide needs assessment resources for professionals that go beyond the situation analysis process, but that these need to come with expectations regarding how frequently they need to be used. She said,

And a couple of them also mentioned, sort of just the general support and structure around not necessarily situational analysis, but just needs assessments in general. And my editorial comment on that is that I don't think we do a good job as a system talking about needs assessment and situational analysis and how that's different or the same. But, agents can't be doing a big situation analysis every year. So how do we help them now? Because five years is now a really long time in a community, so that's my editorial comment.

In addition, more direction was needed for handling needs that were identified in communities that may not be seen as falling within Extension's traditional programming.

There were also several recommendations related to the differences between agents and specialists related to the situation analysis process. One member of the research team said,

Back to the disconnect with the specialist - and now we do post the situation analysis. They go on the intranet, and it's probably communicated in some email, once, and if you don't go look at it you're not going to know it's there. . . so that's after the fact. The situation analysis is done, it's posted. The agents in the field have done it and the specialist can go look at it. But how do you get [the specialists] involved to actually identify some of what that is? That would be a question - I would like to figure out how to do that. How do you get [specialists] involved in the actual process?

Another member of the team suggests finding mechanisms so that agents and specialists then work together on organizational outcomes associated with the identified needs. She said,

> But, when they actually look at those and they actually get to compile all of them, so to speak, and they see something bubbling to the top, how can they get a group of agents and specialists together, to strategically work on that in something different than the program teams or whatever? But what kind of working group could they actually put together and be able to apply for grants and develop extremely good curriculum and publications, to come out with extremely positive, or negative - sometimes we need the negative to see the bad too - but the demonstrations, the research to actually look at that and how we can work as a big team, instead of in our own little silos?

Ongoing Needs Assessment Methods

The discussion related to ongoing needs assessment related to what happens in the five years between the development of the Situational Analysis report as well as opportunities to reach audiences that are not already involved with VCE. One member said,

> One thing that emerged in our discussion was talking about community involvement and going to different stakeholder meetings, going to committee meetings, going to community groups, School board meetings, board of supervisors meetings - those types of things - to find out what was being discussed, what some of those needs were. And I think that's something that we've been talking about in training for years. But I think it's something we need to really hit home with because that's the type of needs assessment that you get on an ongoing basis. And you can see, the gradual shift, whereas the situation analysis is a every five-year thing. So, I just think, as we're talking about actionable items, making sure that we talk about or emphasize that continual community involvement. And it doesn't have to have to be you going to every single meeting. But you've got that group of volunteers around who are representative. Somebody at the Farm Bureau meeting, somebody at the school board meeting, somebody at the City Council, town council, board of supervisors, whatever. Someone goes to the library. I mean, just everywhere, because you can get information. You can get information walking down the grocery store aisle. I get so much of my needs assessment information that way. I mean, so I just think that's something that for actionable items we need to emphasize - that continual ear to the ground and network. That it's not just you collecting assessment information - you can have a group of people who are listening and if one person hears it great. If three people hear it, that says something more. If 10 people hear that says something even more.

An agent on the research team suggested also employing ELC in the needs assessment process. He said,

> I think it's not only empowering the coworkers that are mid-career, but our ELC and field partners. . . . and empowering for those members to say, 'Hey you know, not only do we need to get the surveys as agents, but we would like for you to bring back 10 from your community.' And now, being able to be professional enough to empower people. You know, and they had expectations, and some of them, above and beyond, 'Oh, I got 15'.

Another agent spoke of involving ELC in gathering data at a local grocery store. She said,

> We had a very active ELC and went to Food Lion, to the grocery store, and surveyed people coming in and out of the door to find out - just random people. I don't know what segment of the community. But they shopped, they got groceries. And so, we asked them. . .. We were empowered and that's something that's easy to do, but you have to have that professionalism, you have to have that communication, you have to have that connection to people to make that happen. Connection to your community.

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