

Needs Assessment

*A Systematic Approach
to Data Collection*

Ananda Mitra



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This book is dedicated to those who have sought reliable data and conducted accurate data analysis to make important decisions about how they serve others.

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Preface

The idea of collecting citizen input before making decisions that would affect the lives of the citizens is fundamental to a democratic society where the people in power are supposed to serve the citizens who put them in charge. Furthermore, collecting this information becomes crucial when it is the citizens' money that would be spent by those in power. To conduct public planning without bringing the "public" into the process seems to miss the mark of sound planning for local governments. This book provides a road map for collecting citizen input that is reliably collected and honestly used. Consultants use a variety of ways to collect citizen input, and the methods vary in rigor and the quality of information produced. Unfortunately, much of what is touted as "citizen input" serves as "dog and pony" shows where the citizens get a feeling of being involved without any reliable and trustworthy data coming from "public meetings" and such events that are periodically held by consultants. This book provides a rigorous approach to collecting citizen input. As is the case in any scientific method, this book offers a treatment that can be conducted by anyone who is able to follow the directions in the book correctly. This makes the process repeatable and testable, both of which are critical to the scientific method. For the recreation practitioner, this book illustrates the best practices of collecting citizen data, and most importantly, allows the recreation professional to recognize unscientific attempts at citizen data collection and to be wary of information generated by less reliable methods.

Foreword

by

Dr. Joseph J. Bannon, Professor Emeritus
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I first became acquainted with Ananda Mitra in the early 1980s when he was a staff member at the University of Illinois Survey Research Laboratory. He was involved in developing needs assessments and community surveys, and I asked him to evaluate several questionnaires created by the Office of Recreation and Park Resources at the University of Illinois. I discovered that he was extremely well qualified in the area of needs assessment and understood survey research better than anyone I had ever dealt with.

As a result, he then became a colleague, and we worked together over the years to conduct over 100 needs assessments for park and recreation agencies throughout the country, evaluating and reporting on the recreation and leisure needs, desires, and future developments in numerous communities. Ananda understands the importance of eliciting supportable data and making it accessible to agencies in a reliable and user-friendly manner so they may more efficiently and effectively meet the needs of their constituents.

Assisting agencies in these vital needs assessments has become more important than ever in the current economic climate with its focus on leaner budgets and operating funds. All public agencies must critically analyze all expenditures, facilities built and maintained, and programs offered in a continued effort to better serve the public with a decreasing supply of discretionary cash.

Community health has become a high priority across the nation. Changing population demographics in the last decade have reflected the growing number of baby boomers reaching senior citizenship. This section of the population is growing at a rapid pace and is far more active and healthy in its retirement years than in generations past. This important constituent group will increasingly consider and in fact demand more opportunities to partake in active and healthy activities in their communities.

In this book, *Needs Assessment: A Systematic Approach to Data Collection*, Mitra explores important concepts in collecting citizen input and describes specific techniques and methods of accurate and relevant data collection. He underlines the necessity of using proper methodology to develop reliable questionnaires for adults and youth that will produce quantifiable and supportable data. He also outlines the importance of focus groups and how to conduct them in an effective way to provide citizens with sat-

isfactory opportunities for input on all needs assessment topics in their communities.

There is a wealth of information in the Appendices covering sample questions for adults and youth, sample mailing pieces and emails, executive summaries, action plans, and presentation material. Mitra also discusses CompuRec, a program he personally developed, which allows agencies to take the information collected in the needs assessment and interpret the data to suite their communities' specific needs in ways never before possible. They can go far beyond the results reflected in the final report and extrapolate more detailed and specific information and apply it to their constituents' wants and needs.

Ananda Mitra has appeared at countless state and national conferences, giving presentations on systematic data collection and conducting needs assessments. Within these pages, you will discover much of the valuable insight he has gained while working with hundreds of board members, focus groups, and a wide variety of constituents about the importance of collecting reliable citizen input in needs assessments. *Needs Assessment: A Systematic Approach to Data Collection* does not just give direction about how to conduct surveys; it is a roadmap to creating action plans developed from the data collected to improve recreation and leisure facilities and opportunities for future generations.

1

Citizen Input as the Voice of the People

In a democratic system of governance, the most important element of decision making is the opinion of the citizen. In America, the entire governmental system is fundamentally based on the principles laid out in the Constitution, which puts power in the hands of the people who ultimately choose the people who run the government.

This same principle applies to every aspect of governance, where every citizen is offered the opportunity to provide a voice in the decision-making process. This principle was easier to apply when the citizenry was smaller; and it was possible for local governments to conduct meetings where every member of the community was present to voice an opinion and perhaps cast a vote when a decision was made. For instance, in Massachusetts, towns with fewer than 6,000 people are expected to make decisions through the open town meeting form of government, where every member of the town is expected to participate in a democratic process when a decision is being made by the local government (towns with more than 6,000 people in Massachusetts can make decisions using a representative town meeting form of government).

The voice of the citizen has played a critical role in the development of government and its services in the United States, and that same principle motivates the need for conducting citizen data collection with respect to parks and recreation management discussed in this book.

The primary focus of this book is the way in which recreation services are delivered to a constituency through a local government agency. This process of delivery is quite different from the form of recreation provided by private agencies. The difference in the way recreation delivery is managed by the public and private systems stems from a fundamental difference between the purposes of the entities. The private recreation provider, such as a health

club, is in the business of making a profit by marketing its services to its most lucrative customer. The health club is interested in identifying a market segment that is most likely to pay for the privilege of using exercise equipment and would sell its services to that market. The club feels no obligation to market itself or to offer its services to a large population group as long as its target group is able to provide sufficient business. For example, the well-known national chain Gold's Gym first opened in 1965 in Venice Beach, California, and was targeted toward the body building sub-culture with Arnold Schwarzenegger as one of the early patrons of the first store. The focus on a target market with the intention of making a profit by providing a narrow set of services makes it simpler for private recreation providers to collect information from their market. The private provider is essentially interested in a "market" which will yield "customers" and "users," whereas the public recreation provider is interested in a "citizen," whose interests could be very diverse and who might never become a customer in the narrow sense of being a user of a recreation opportunity.

Every taxpayer is a part of the market served by a public recreation agency, and every taxpayer has a stake in the public agency, much like a stockholder would have an interest in a company. The public agency is also usually not interested in making a profit that will allow it to expand its services or add to its customer base. The profit motivation that drives the private corporation, and often determines the fate of a corporation, is far less urgent for a public agency. A public recreation provider is expected to offer a service to the community of taxpayers, as is evident in the mission statement of one of the largest public recreation providers in the United States, the Chicago Park District (CPD). It states, "Enhance the quality of life throughout Chicago by becoming a leading provider of recreation and leisure opportunities."

Although the mission also includes an assurance that the user will be satisfied by the opportunities offered by the CPD, the key to the mission is enhancing the quality of life throughout a massive urban area. The key to fulfilling such a mission is gaining an understanding of what the term "quality of life" means for the people in the service area, and then offering the people in the service area an opportunity to determine what services would indeed enhance their quality of life. This can only be done by returning to the basic democratic principle of allowing the citizen to have a voice, albeit one that is more detailed than the casting of a "yay" or "nay" vote, but actually returning to some form of the "town meeting" of the New England states where the citizen can actually elaborate on an issue before casting a vote. As such, the "vote" and "voice" do not become synonymous within the realm of recreation services. The vote can result after the citizen has had a chance to voice opinions about quality of life, but a vote alone is insufficient to gauge what the citizens want in terms of recreation services that enhance the quality of life.

The matter is specially complicated for public recreation providers as compared to other public agencies, such as a police or fire department, where the quality of life is somewhat simpler to define. For example, a police department would be interested in keeping neighborhoods safe. There is not much leeway or debate about the definition of the notion of good quality of life for the police department. Most taxpayers would want safe neighborhoods. The matter is more complicated with parks and recreation services because the quality of life could vary widely between different sectors of the population. The quality of life of young mothers with children would be enhanced with safe playgrounds, whereas the quality of life of a teenager would be enhanced with good video game parlors. Such variations in the expectations make it important to go beyond the vote when determining policy related to parks and recreation services.

The voice of the people, their opinion, their needs, their complaints, and their accolades need to be heard in order for the public recreation provider to serve the population that pays for the existence of the recreation agency. It is this focus on voice that makes it critical that parks and recreation agencies spend effort to collect input from citizens they serve, and the fundamental definition of citizen input rotates around the notion of voice, where the person who is being provided the service can become an agent of change in a democratic system. Indeed, without this voice, the system becomes autocratic where the recreation agency is the agent of change (or lack thereof) and the people being served become powerless in deciding the role of recreation in enhancing quality of life. Citizen input, by definition, thus becomes the material in a democratic system that offers people the power to define their destiny with respect to recreation and leisure.

Whose Voice?

The fundamental principle driving the collection of citizen input is embedded in a democratic principle that dictates that policy decisions are driven by feedback from the people who are affected by the policy. This approach to gathering citizen input is specially dependant on who, among the people, have the rights and abilities to voice themselves. Early democratic systems, such as those in ancient Greece and Rome, automatically excluded half the population—women—from participating in a democratic process because women had neither voice nor vote. That tradition of the classical period was continued in America until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment of the American Constitution allowed women the guaranteed right to vote. The democratic system is dependent on ensuring that all members of the system have an equal right to have a voice and a vote in the decision-making process. As a corollary to that proposition stands the abhorrence that democratic systems should have for special interest groups who might have clout to make

changes that benefit the special interest group without bringing any improvements in the quality of life of others. It is also not unusual for special interest groups to set up systematic lobbying, even by placing their representative in decision-making positions, so that the special interests would be served better than the interests of the community at large.

There are many different ways in which the process of special interest service is guaranteed within the decision process for parks and recreation agencies. As any director of a recreation agency will attest, there often are people from special interest groups who are regular participants in the open meetings held by local governments. For instance, members of a special sports club could ensure that a large number of their patrons are present at all city council meetings where recreation-related matters are discussed. In an age of the Internet, where meetings agendas are often available on the World Wide Web (Web) it is not difficult to find out what decisions would be made at a future meeting. Special interest groups can ensure that their members are present in the audience, and could easily dominate the public commentary segment of the meeting by presenting the needs of their special group. Repeated presence at meetings, and a consistent request for services and facilities, could eventually sway elected officials who might acquiesce to the demands of special groups, and commit public money to do things that might only be of benefit to the special group. Such moves run contrary to the basic purpose of a recreation agency, and such follies can be avoided by remaining true to the process of collecting citizen input.

The process of collecting citizen is designed to avoid the biases related to special interest groups. A scientifically reliable and properly executed citizen data collection effort would produce information that would represent the voice of the entire community without favoring a more vocal group over a silent group. This component of citizen input is especially important because the composition of the vocal and silent groups tend to change with time. Some people who might have been very loud about their needs at one time could become drowned out by a louder group. These changes are not necessarily reflective of the changes in the population, but arbitrary changes in the community. Citizen input must be sensitive to the systematic changes in the population and periodically collected data needs to reflect the consequence of the changes.

Voices that Change

The changes in the population characteristics lead to changes in the definition of the quality of life. In the first decade of the 21st century, America has witnessed increasing migration of people from Spanish-speaking countries, large numbers of baby boomers retiring from the workforce, and an increasing health awareness that leads to rethinking the idea of a good life.

Such changes have profound impact on recreation agencies as new forms of leisure activities are demanded by the population. Yet, not all the components of the new population may be vocal in their demands, and without the scope of providing input, some segments would simply be overlooked. This is why the process of collecting citizen input is not a single-shot, static process which is done once and then forgotten. A responsible public agency needs to be able to periodically collect citizen input and create a longitudinal database that allows the agency to track changes and see how well the agency is responding to changes. Citizen input takes on a temporal value as it allows for benchmarking with the same agency doing an internal comparison that spans over time. If many different agencies did the same thing, it could be possible to develop a national inventory of citizen input about recreation and leisure. Such a compendium could serve as the touchstone for benchmarking, and to see how citizen input changes over time. Needless to say, the way in which the input is collected is particularly important to ensure that the data can be compared to each other.

Voices that Matter

Having reliable citizen input data also serves an extremely important procedural purpose since many policy decisions could be adjusted by what the citizens might have to say. Public agencies have to make short- and long-term policy decisions that impact the quality of life of the people served by the agency. Some of the impact is most visible when parks and recreation agencies decide to do things. For example, the beautification of a neighborhood park becomes evident to many members of the population, just as ignoring the maintenance of parks can quickly attract complaints from the population. Yet, such responses are intimately tied to specific policy decisions made at every level of the management of a recreation agency. Citizen input can help to shape the decisions by providing a sense of direction for the recreation agency planners.

There are two major ways in which citizen input plays a role in the decision-making process. First, the voices of the citizens matter because the population must feel a sense of satisfaction with the service that they are paying for with their taxes. There could be many minor reasons for citizen dissatisfaction. For example, my research in nearly a hundred different communities in America show that citizens are mostly dissatisfied with the amount of information they receive about recreation opportunities offered by agencies, claiming that there is never sufficient information about recreation opportunities. Such input can be quickly translated into policy decisions where the agency explores innovative ways of reaching out to the population. This could lead to some changes in marketing policy like changing the emphasis to electronic communication from the traditional advertisement in local

newspapers. However, that change in decision is not done arbitrarily, but is indeed based on data gathered through citizen input. Voices of the citizens can, and should, matter when such decisions are made.

Recreation agencies also have to make a second kind of long-term and high-impact decisions that could determine the path of the agency for many years. These decisions are often tied to a master planning process where an agency must create a strategic master plan to take into the future. Numerous decisions need to be made as a part of execution of the master plan after a plan has been developed and adopted. Many of the decisions can have a direct impact on the citizens that are served by the agency, and it is only fair that the citizen voices be given adequate weight when making decisions that would affect the citizens. It is therefore especially important to include an opportunity for the citizens to have a voice before a master plan is developed. Indeed, a plan that does not begin with the access to reliable citizen input is not a true master plan but only an internal document that the agency might have developed to chart its course. Such a document could be easy to produce but is essentially worthless since it does not include the voices of the citizens who are the most important component of the master planning process. It is also important to note that the voices that are used in the planning process must not only be those of the special interest groups, as pointed out earlier, but the master planning process must allow all segments of the citizens to weigh in on the planning process. Citizen input at the beginning of the planning phase can actually allow local governments to save resources since the citizens might be desiring things that could be quite different from the high-price items that the agency might have considered putting in. Thus, citizen voices should matter a lot in the planning process.

One of the key aspects of planning is communicating with the constituency that is served by a recreation agency. The process of providing recreation opportunities is closely tied to the way in which the people are informed about what is being offered. In nearly every one of about a hundred studies that I have run, one of the top three reasons why people do not participate in recreation programs is their lack of information about the recreation opportunities that are available. Yet, the directors of most of the hundred agencies would feel that they are doing all they can to market their services. Often, the disconnect lies in the fact that agencies have not paid adequate attention to the voices of the people who can provide some direction about the best way of reaching the constituency. The citizen voices matter because the citizens can let the agency know what works for the specific community. Incorporating that information in the marketing and promotional plans would allow the agencies to do the marketing in a targeted and efficient way, eventually leading to a more lean and financially responsible way of marketing its services. Listening to the citizens leads to an understanding of how to communicate with them.

In the end, the citizen voices matter because the citizens are the stakeholders for a public recreation agency. Although there are layers of leadership like a city council or a park board who are supposed to uphold the citizen voices, there could be gaps in the way in which such intermediary bodies work. Going directly to the citizen offers a way of collecting relevant information from the market as opposed to listening to a few people, like seven members of a park board, to make significant policy decisions. A scientifically valid process can produce data that can help inform different components of an agency's activities, some of which can lead to significant organizational change that would eventually benefit the community and the agency.

These benefits make the process of collecting citizen input a particularly important task for public agencies such as recreation providers. Yet, this process is often either ignored by the agencies or done in a way that is so fundamentally erroneous that the data proves to be more harmful than useful. This book lays out the best practices of collecting citizen input focusing on the specific scientific method that must be used and also focusing on the specific kinds of skills that are required to conduct a citizen data-collection process. The next chapter describes some of the key objectives that must be enumerated when collecting citizen input.