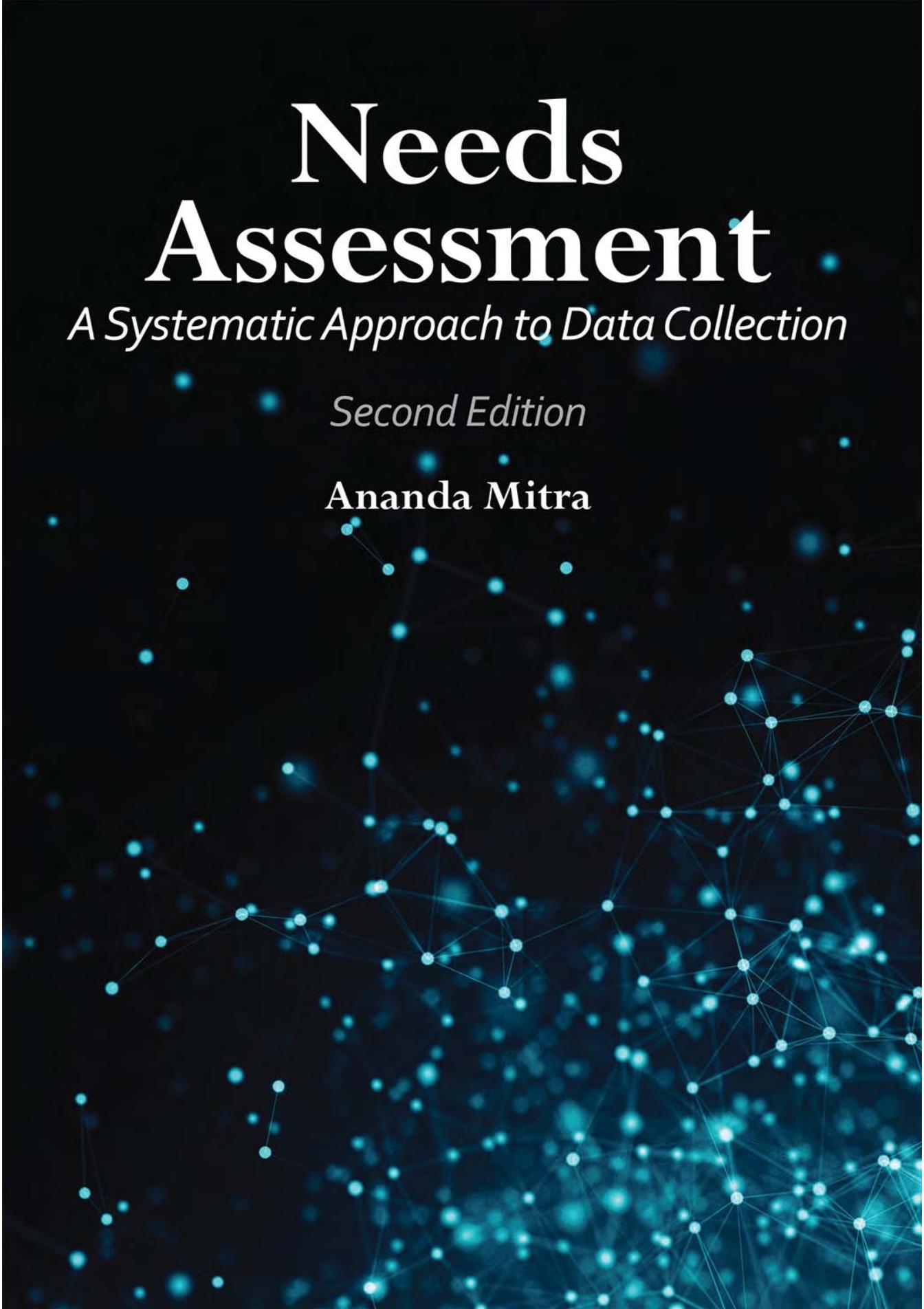


Needs Assessment

A Systematic Approach to Data Collection

Second Edition

Ananda Mitra



Needs Assessment

A Systematic Approach to Data Collection

Second Edition

Ananda Mitra

© 2018 Sagamore–Venture Publishing LLC
All rights reserved.

Publishers: Joseph J. Bannon/Peter Bannon
Sales and Marketing Manager: Misti Gilles
Marketing Assistant: Kimberly Vecchio
Director of Development and Production: Susan M. Davis
Production Coordinator: Amy S. Dagit
Cover Design: Marissa Willison
Technology Manager: Mark Atkinson

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018930969
ISBN print edition: 978-1-57167-857-7
ISBN ebook: 978-1-57167-858-4

SAGAMORE  VENTURE

1807 N. Federal Dr.
Urbana, IL 61801
www.sagamorepub.com

*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*

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
Foreword	xiii
1 Citizen Input as the Voice of the People.....	1
Whose Voice?	3
Voices That Change.....	4
Voices That Matter	5
2 Key Objectives in Citizen Data Collection.....	9
User vs. Nonuser	9
Describing Recreation	11
Recreation Needs	12
What People Think	13
What People Do	13
Who the People Are	14
Customizing a Study	15
3 Methods of Collecting Input.....	17
Qualitative vs. Quantitative Methods.....	17
Selecting a Method	20
4 Talking to the Community	23
Elements of the Focus Group Meeting.....	24
5 Asking Questions	29
Questionnaire Wording and Formatting.....	32
Factors to Consider in Questionnaire Design	34
Conventions to Follow for Questionnaire Format	38
6 Collecting Data	41
Response Rate.....	41
Modes of Data Collection	44

7	Where the Data Come From	59
	Definition of the Population and Listing the Population	59
	Obtaining Representativeness in the Sample	63
	Random Selection	64
	Sample Selection.....	65
	Alternatives to Simple Random Sampling.....	66
	Determining the Optimum Sample Size	69
8	Analysis of Quantitative Data.....	73
	The Basics	74
	Variables: Independent and Dependent.....	77
	Setting Up the Data for Analysis.....	78
	Descriptive Analysis	80
	Analysis of Trends	82
	Tests of Difference	84
	Analysis of Relationships.....	86
	Factor Analysis and Reliability Checks.....	88
9	Analysis of Narrative Data	91
	Collecting Data	92
	Analysis	94
	The Theory of Narbs.....	95
	Analytic Tools.....	96
	Analytical Process and Outcomes.....	97
	RecStor	98
10	Data Utilization	101
	Decision Making.....	101
	Public Face.....	103
	Action Plans	104
11	Managing a Study	105
	Timing.....	105
	Process and Skill Management.....	107
	Resource Management	108
12	Outsourcing	111
	Criteria for Making a Wise Choice	112
	Selecting a Research Group	114

13 Special Applications	119
Evaluation	119
One-Time Decision Making.....	120
Special Groups.....	120
Appendix A Questionnaire – Adult	123
Appendix B Questionnaire – Youth.....	127
Appendix C Cover Letter.....	129
Appendix D Maps	130
Appendix E Outgoing Envelope	131
Appendix F Reminder Postcard	132
Appendix G Web-Based Questionnaire.....	133
Appendix H Invitation E-Mail	137
Appendix I Executive Summary	138
Appendix J Action Plan.....	139
Appendix K Presentation Slides.....	141
Appendix L CompuRec	153
Index.....	161

Acknowledgments

I would like to this opportunity to express my thanks to my wife and son as they have patiently tolerated my erratic writing schedule that was required to complete this book. Without a doubt, this book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of Professor Joseph Bannon, who has pioneered the idea of doing scientific research to assist in public policy planning with respect to leisure and recreation. His work has inspired me to continue to develop this area of research. In many ways, I am also indebted to the staff of nearly 100 recreation agencies with whom I have had the opportunity to work over the last couple of decades. I have learnt from conducting studies for these agencies, and I have learnt from the thousands of people I have had a chance to meet in nearly 700 focus groups over 20 years. All of that has helped to write this book. Of course, this book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my family strewn across the world, my colleagues at Wake Forest University, and a rich tapestry of friends. I owe you all.

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 power to start with. Furthermore, collecting this information becomes crucial when it is the citizen's money that would be spent by those in power. To do public planning without bringing the "public" into the process seems to miss the mark of a sound planning process for local governments. This book provides a road map for collecting citizen input whereby the input is reliably collected and honestly used. Different consultants provide different ways of collecting 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 a dog and pony show in which 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, especially in the age of the connected citizen who has numerous digital ways of making oneself heard. It is no longer the case that the netizen (a user of the Internet) is silent, and because of the abundance of the ways in which grievances can be expressed, it is all the more critical to have a systematic and scientific way to collect and manage the growing amount of information that is often called big data. 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 would show the best practices of collecting citizen data and, most important, allow the recreation professional to recognize the unscientific attempts at citizen data collection and be wary of information generated by less reliable methods.

Foreword

by

Dr. Joseph J. Bannon, Professor Emeritus

University of Illinois

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. He is well qualified in the area of needs assessment and has a great understanding of survey research.

Over the years, we worked together to conduct needs assessments for park and recreation agencies throughout the country, evaluating and reporting on the recreation and leisure needs, desires, and future developments in many communities. Mitra 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. Data drive budgets and provide justification for expenditures—data show the value of parks and recreation.

In this book, *Needs Assessment: A Systematic Approach to Data Collection*, 2nd edition, 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 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 satisfactory opportunities for input on all needs assessment topics in their communities.

The Appendices includes a wealth of information covering sample questions for adults and youth, sample mailing pieces and e-mails, 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 suit the specific needs of their communities. 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.

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*, 2nd edition, is an in-depth guide to collecting high quality data and putting it to use to benefit agencies and ultimately their constituents.

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 governmental system is fundamentally based on the principles laid out in the Constitution, which puts power in the hands of the people, who ultimately decide on the people who run the government. This same principle applies to every aspect of governance in which every citizen is offered the opportunity to provide a voice in the decision-making process. The principle was easier to apply when the citizenry was smaller, and it was possible for local governments to conduct meetings for which every member of the community would be present to voice an opinion and perhaps cast a vote when a decision had to be made. To be sure, the process was simple because the citizens had the ability to voice themselves under controlled conditions in specific real-life forums. For instance, in Massachusetts, towns with fewer than 6,000 people are expected to make decisions through the open town meeting form of government in which every member of the town is expected to participate in a democratic process when the local government is making a decision (towns with more than 6,000 people in Massachusetts can make decisions using a representative town meeting form of government). Those days are rapidly disappearing as individuals are able to attain a digital voice through easily available means of expressing themselves using nearly ubiquitous digital tools such as smartphones and digital environments such as Twitter and Facebook. Yet independent of how the voice is articulated and heard, the words of the citizens have 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.

This book primarily focuses on monitoring the voices of the people to make decisions about the way in which recreation services are delivered to a constituency through a local government agency. This process of delivery is different from

that of private agencies. The difference in the way that public and private systems manage the delivery of recreation 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 so that it can sell its services to that market. The club feels no obligation to market itself or 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 it targeted the bodybuilding subculture, 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 that 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 has an interest in a company. Increasingly, with the new digital tools available to citizens, the once "silent mass" is now becoming increasingly vocal, especially with respect to the response to public agencies that are meant to serve the "public" as opposed to the motive of private recreation providers whose rightful interest is in making a profit and expanding its services or adding to its customer base. The profit motivation driving the private corporation, and often determining 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, n.d.): "Enhance the quality of life throughout Chicago by becoming a leading provider of recreation and leisure opportunities" (para. 1). Although the mission also includes an assurance that the user will be satisfied by the opportunities the CPD offers, the key to the mission is enhancing the quality of life throughout a massive urban area. The key to fulfilling such a mission is to gain 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. An agency can do this only 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 in which the citizen can 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 might result after the citizen has voiced 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 especially complicated for

public recreation providers as compared to other public agencies such as a police or fire department for which the quality of life is somewhat simpler to define. For example, a police department is 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 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 video-game parlors. Such variations in the expectations make it important for agencies to go beyond the vote when determining parks and recreation services policy. The voice of the people, their opinion, their needs, their complaints, and their accolades need to be heard for the public recreation provider to serve the population that pays for the existence of the recreation agency. This focus on voice makes it critical that parks and recreation agencies collect input from the citizens they serve, and the fundamental definition of citizen input rotates around the notion of voice, for which the recipient of the service can become an agent of change in a democratic system. Indeed, without this voice, the system becomes autocratic and 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 especially dependent 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, as women had neither voice nor vote. That tradition of the classical period was continued in America until 1920, when the 19th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteed women the 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 that 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.

The process of special interest service is guaranteed in many ways within the decision process for parks and recreation agencies. As any director of a recreation

agency will attest, people from special interest groups often participate 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 at which recreation-related matters are discussed. In an age of the Internet, when meetings agendas are often available on the World Wide Web, it is not difficult for anyone to find out what decisions will 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. Now, such groups can clog up the e-mail of an agency or produce a micro-blog via a service such as Twitter and persistently spread their voices far and wide. Such strategies could eventually sway elected officials, who might acquiesce to the demands of special groups and commit public money to activities that only benefit the special group. Such moves are contrary to the basic purpose of a recreation agency, and parks and recreation agencies can avoid such follies by remaining true to the process of collecting citizen input.

The process of collecting citizen data was designed to avoid the biases related to special interest groups. A scientifically reliable and properly executed citizen data collection effort would produce information that represents 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. 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 of arbitrary changes in the community. Citizen input must be sensitive to the systematic changes in the population, and data that are collected periodically need to reflect the consequence of the changes.

Voices That Change

Changes in population characteristics lead to changes in the definition of the quality of life. In the first decade of the 21st century, America has witnessed an 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 effects on recreation agencies, with the population demanding new forms of leisure activities. Yet not all of the components of the new population are vocal in their demands, and without the scope of providing input, some segments could simply be overlooked. This is why the process of collecting citizen input is not a single-shot, static process that is done once and then forgotten. This is especially important now with the population constantly using digital systems of voicing. It only takes a small event to be sent out as a Facebook post for thousands of citizens to pick it up, making a small issue “viral” within the community. There is an increasing need to be able to analyze such situations; a responsible public agency needs to be able to find the balance between different types of information and keeping a dynamic pulse on the

community. Citizen input takes on a temporal value, allowing for benchmarking with the same agency doing an internal comparison that spans over time. If many 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 determining 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

Reliable citizen input data also serve an important procedural purpose, allowing the public agency to adjust many policy decisions based on what the citizens have to say. Public agencies make short- and long-term policy decisions that affect the quality of life of the people they serve. Some of the effects are most visible when parks and recreation agencies act on their decisions. For example, the beautification of a neighborhood park becomes evident to many members of the population, just as ignoring the maintenance of parks quickly attracts complaints from the population. Yet such responses are intimately tied to specific policy decisions made at every level of recreation agency management. Citizen input helps to shape the decisions by providing a sense of direction for recreation agency planners.

Citizen input plays a role in the decision-making process in two major ways. First, the voices of the citizens matter and the population must feel a sense of satisfaction with the service that they are paying for with their taxes. Citizen dissatisfaction could occur for many minor reasons. For example, my research in more than 100 communities in America shows that citizens are mostly dissatisfied with the amount of information they receive about recreation opportunities offered by agencies, claiming that they never receive sufficient information about such opportunities. The agency can quickly translate such input into policy decisions and explore innovative ways of reaching out to the population. This could lead to changes in marketing policy, such as changing the emphasis to electronic communication from the traditional advertisement in local newspapers. However, that change is not done arbitrarily, but is indeed based on data gathered through citizen input. Voices of the citizens can and should matter when agencies make such decisions.

Second, recreation agencies also have to make long-term and high-impact decisions that could determine the path of the agency for many years. These decisions are often tied to the agency creating a strategic master plan. Recreation agencies make numerous decisions as part of executing the master plan after developing and adopting the plan. Many of the decisions directly affect the citizens served by the agency, and it is only fair that the agency give citizen voices adequate weight when making decisions that would affect them. It is therefore especially important for the agency to include an opportunity for the citizens to voice themselves, before developing a master plan. Indeed, a plan that does not begin with access to reliable citizen input is not a true master plan but only an internal document that the agency has developed to chart its course. Such a document could be easy to produce

but is essentially worthless because it does not include the voices of the citizens, the most important component of the master planning process. It is also important to note that the planning process must include not only the voices of the special interest groups, as pointed out, but also the voices of all of the other segments of the population. Citizen input at the beginning of the planning phase could allow local governments to save resources if the citizens desire things that are different from the high-price items the agency might have been considering. Citizen voices, thus, should matter a lot in the planning process.

A key aspect of planning is communicating with the constituency served by the 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 100 studies that I have run, one of the top three reasons why people do not participate in recreation programs is the lack of information about the recreation opportunities available. Yet the directors of most of these agencies felt that they were doing all they could 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 and the citizens let the agency know what works for the specific community. Incorporating that information into the marketing and promotional plans would allow the agencies to market in a targeted and efficient way, eventually leading to a leaner and more financially responsible way of marketing their services. Listening to the citizens helps agencies to understand how to communicate with them in a digitally connected world in which every digital utterance can and should be followed up with a response. Consider the way in which TripAdvisor allows users of hotels and motels to provide a review. However, the site also allows a property owner to respond to each review, creating a digital dialogue that is accessible to a potential user of the place. The agency can make that connectivity systematic by working with new data collection and analysis methods, which are discussed later in the book.

In the end, the citizen voices matter because the citizens are the stakeholders for a public recreation agency. Although the layers of leadership such as a city council and a park board 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 the agency a way of collecting relevant information from the market as opposed to listening to a few people, such as seven members of a park board, to make significant policy decisions. A scientifically valid process produces data that help inform different components of an agency's activities, some of which might 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 agencies often either ignore this process or do it in a way that is so fundamentally erroneous that the data prove 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 on the specific 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.

Reference

Chicago Park District. (n.d.). Mission and core values. Retrieved September 26, 2017, from <http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/about-us/mission-core-values/>