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Data-Driven Decision-Making:
An Analysis of Needs Assessment Methodology in
Northwestern Pennsylvania Nonprofit Organizations

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the
Department of Public Policy and Administration
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of
Doctor of Public Administration

By

Jason D. Brady

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With genuine gratefulness, I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, James and Jeanne Brady, for their continuous support. Additionally, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Amanda Olejarski for providing me with excellent guidance throughout this project.

Abstract

This research examines the community needs of a specific region, Northwestern Pennsylvania, in order to determine how well the community's current social needs are being addressed by the nonprofit organizations in this area. A comprehensive review of related literature is provided in order to establish a theoretical framework for this topic. This background is utilized in the development and execution of a community needs assessment for the Northwest Pennsylvania region. This assessment, presented in the form of an online survey, resulted in 714 unique responses within the selected region. Quantitative and qualitative methods are applied to the gathered data in order to uncover the unmet needs of the region and clarify how they can be better served by nonprofit organizations. The research investigates the benefits of implementing needs assessment tools that would provide a consistent standard upon which to base administrative decisions. As a result of this study, the research indicates areas for improvement within this region and the importance of the views of local citizens and experts within the nonprofit community.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nonprofit organizations can differ significantly from traditional private sector organizations in many respects, the most apparent of which is the absence of profit motivation. Within the traditional corporation, this important distinction has been a driving force in the production of abundant amounts of research regarding the use of data and decision-making methodology. Comparatively, little research has been conducted on the use of data-supported decision-making in nonprofits. The objective of this literature review and the following research is to investigate how nonprofit organizations can effectively utilize data to make decisions and strategically respond to the organizational environment. Leaders in nonprofit organizations are able to see the value of data in the decision-making process and be provided with a new context for how data can be utilized for distinct organizations.

Previous academic research suggests that nonprofit decisions are unique in that they are significantly more operational than strategic and that they exhibit a decision-making orientation primarily geared towards implementation and effectiveness (Byrnes, 2012). The literature review explores the role of rationality in nonprofit decision-making. In an ideal environment in which all applicable information is available and time restraints do not create a significant barrier, decision-making can be observed as being based on a rational and conscious choice that results from extensive deliberation. However, in a realistic environment in which information and resource constraints present limitations, the decision-maker seeks a reasonable and acceptable solution rather than an ideal one (Simon, 1997). The control and usage of information have been shown to be an important factor in the decision-making process. The role

of quality information may be even more critical in the environment of organizational decisions that involve more than one individual.

Group decision-making allows for the advantage of combining information, resources, and ideas as well as facilitating a greater understanding of how all stakeholders are impacted by the results of the decision. However, it is important to recognize that individuals can be influenced by social pressures within a group format, hindering the flow of opinions and information. It is important to recognize underlying power dynamics within the group in order to prevent dominant members from limiting the input of other group members. Additionally, the individuals who facilitate group decision-making must take into consideration the culture and ethics of the organization with which they are working. Organizations that rely heavily on structure and group hierarchy may be challenged by the sharing of information and ideas that do not conform to that structure (Farrow, 1980).

The primary data required for community decision-making can be acquired through a variety of different research methods, such as interviews, telephone surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and asset inventories. Regardless of the type of methodology that it implemented, this data can be shown to be critical to the continual evaluation of how organizations are allocating energy, time, and other resources in order to reach their objectives. In the collection of primary data, it is important to limit the risk of examining only highly representative sections of a population. This risk can be minimized through the collection of data from multiple groups, including the target population, service providers, and key decision-makers, to perform this type of needs assessment (Kluger, 2006).

Utilizing the information presented in the literature review, this research explores the views of individuals in a selected region through several different methods. Initially, a

community survey is utilized to gather quantitative data from the general population. This survey is designed to assess the perceived social needs of the community and how well these needs are being addressed by existing community organizations. The survey tool was selected in order to gather significant amounts of primary data that reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives within the selected community. In addition to the act of simple data collection, the survey also improves community awareness of the topics described in the survey and allows individuals the opportunity to express their opinions about the conditions of their local area.

Utilizing the primary data, the use of perceptual mapping indicates the level of disparity between the importance of distinct areas of social need, and how well these needs are being addressed by organizations within the community. Additionally, this tool creates a dramatic visual presentation of the data, allowing the observer to easily recognize distinct areas of disparity in the region. Paired sample T-tests demonstrate the hypothesis that there is evidence that the mean difference between these two calculations is significantly different from each other. The survey has also allowed for the collection of demographic information that can be classified by the respondent's age, gender, marital and parental status. This information was able to provide response distributions for each of the demographic variables, indicating how each of these factors influenced the assessment of need.

Later in this research process, leaders in community organizations are surveyed, providing them the opportunity to complete the questions presented to the general population, as well as respond to questions that address the respondent's role in the organization, their view of the organization's effectiveness, and the current community needs assessment processes used by the organization for which they are employed. Finally, focus groups are utilized to provide qualitative feedback regarding the previously collected quantitative data from leaders of

community organizations. The focus group data provide a personal context to the challenges and opportunities that are faced by those that address areas of community need. Organizational leaders are presented with demonstrable evidence regarding the benefits of data-driven decisions and how organizations can benefit from the inclusion of this type of research in the setting and achievement of their objectives. As with the community survey, the activity involved in this section of the research allowed for improved awareness of local issues and an opportunity for nonprofit leaders to express concerns that may not have otherwise been addressed.

By examining the orientation of nonprofit decisions and the opportunities for data implementation, this research attempts to offer greater insights into effective nonprofit management. The mixed-methods approach shows how a variety of approaches to data can be used to uncover opportunities for improvement in the operation of community organizations. The results of this research produced several suggestions for nonprofit practice and policy. Since many nonprofits face ongoing financial and operational challenges, there is a need to study the decision-making processes and opportunities within these organizations. Many of these organizations have faced these challenges for a significant amount of time, limiting their overall effectiveness. By reshaping their strategic orientations towards improved effectiveness, these nonprofits will be more likely to overcome their limitations and improve the management of the organization.

Chapter 2: Literature Review - Decision-Making and the Nonprofit

In his work, *Administrative Behavior*, Herbert Simon (1997) states that operational decision-making and the responsibility of carrying out the key tasks related to an organization's objectives often falls on those at the lowest level of the organization's hierarchical structure. The leader, who operates above this level, exerts their power through their ability to control the decisions of those at lower levels. In larger organizations, an intermediate group of decision-makers falls between the lowest operative level and executive level. These individuals are faced with the decision of how best to convey information and objectives from their superiors to their subordinates (Simon, 1997).

Although this chain of communication is critical to decision-making and the efficiency of most organizations, the quality is highly dependent on the organizational structure which allows for this communication to be successfully achieved. The value of this transmission of information can be viewed within the framework of the classical economic theory of a utility function. This theory suggests that individual decision-makers examine the spectrum of options that are available to them and then proceed by selecting the option that offers maximum utility (Ross, 1973). Based on this theory, individuals within organizations would naturally choose communication methods and make decisions that offer the greatest benefits. This theory is distinctly different from Herbert Simon's idea of bounded rationality which has been described as a response to the economic theory of the utility function (Simon, 1997).

It is Simon's contention that behavior cannot be predicted by an abstract model and the decisions that individuals and organizations make are often not ideal or completely rational.

Alternatively, when decisions are made, the rationality used by the organization or individual is limited by the availability of information, the manageability of the decision parameters, the rational limitations of individuals, and the time that is available to formulate the decision. From this perspective, the decision-maker seeks a reasonable and acceptable solution rather than an ideal one. The author notes that objective rationality would require the organization or individual to direct all behaviors into a consistent pattern, taking into consideration all the information prior to decision-making and the results that would follow from all the available alternatives. The actual behavior often falls short of this ideal and does not taking into consideration all the available information and does not involve a comprehensive deliberation of the information and alternatives (Simon, 1997).

In the *Rationalist Model in Public Decision Making*, the author, Andy Leoveano (2013), notes that public administration decisions are based on a rational and conscious choice that results from extensive deliberation. These types of decisions are the focus of all administrative activities of the given institution. It is the author's contention that decisions in public administration should not be seen only as a simple activity of rational choice between the best of several possible opportunities, but instead, it should be viewed as a complex act, the implementation of which can have irreversible consequences on the lives of others and the welfare of the organization. Decisions relating to public administration tend to be more delicate in comparison to personal decisions since the decision-maker is typically being held responsible for the outcomes of their decision by the general public. Additionally, public administration decisions typically take into consideration the legality and ethics of the issues involved. Although Leoveano acknowledges Herbert Simon's concept of bounded rationality, emphasizing that the concept of absolute rationality can be problematic, the author adds that public

administrative decisions typically follow a highly logical process of predetermined steps that document selection and analysis (Leoveanu, 2013).

Administrative decision-making is highly related to the boundary between the rational and intuitive aspects of social and organizational behavior, particularly involving the decision to "satisfice" (Simon, 1997) rather than choose an optimal approach (Simon, 1997). As a result of nonprofit administrators using this intuitive method for decision-making, the use of information is limited in options that allow for greater efficiency while still achieving minimally acceptable standards for the given objective. The administrator, as a decision-maker, acknowledges that they do not have access to all available information and possible alternatives in choosing a *rule of thumb* that is acceptable within the organization (Leoveanu, 2013).

The individual decision-maker often uses heuristics in order to save time and effort in the decision-making process. These types of mental shortcuts or *rules of thumb* allow the decision-maker to draw a conclusion with limited information in situations in which optimal information gathering and the employment of more complete decision-making tools would be impractical given the constraints of the situation. Although this decision-making method provides greater efficiency, there is also a risk of cognitive bias through the elimination of more complete logical processing (Bogdan, 1998). Heuristics are frequently used by the individual in circumstances when information related to the decision can quickly and vividly be recalled by the decision-maker. The individual may be prone to overestimate or underestimate the likelihood of an event based on the availability of information that they have encountered. Additionally, individuals also utilize representative categories or scales in order to sort information and make decisions quickly often without complete consideration of how applicable these categories are to the given data (Drucker, 1990). For leaders of many nonprofit organizations, the decision-making process

of the individual is often impacted by their tolerance or aversion to risk. Organizations that have limited resources and that are accountable to groups outside of the immediate organizational chain of command may be less likely to take strategic risks that could make portray leaders in a negative manner. Although this orientation may have advantages to organizations that value decisions based on consistency and operational maintenance, this also removes the possibility of decisions with allowing for innovation and higher payoffs (Simon, 1997).

Related to risk aversion, many leaders often experience an aversion to losing that impacts their decision-making process. Economists have noted that leaders often become increasingly committed to a decision once it has been made. Decision-makers often experience an escalation of commitment, allowing for the continued allocation of resources to a course of action, even when there is evidence that other options may produce an improved result. Economic and organization leaders often refer to this phenomenon as a sunk cost, which cannot be recovered by the organization. These costs often impact the judgment of the decision-maker and influence the decision-making process and in a negative manner. By remaining committed to a decision based on the past investment of resources, the allocation of future resources is impacted and the organization remains on the same operational course, even if the information is available that indicated that an improved course of action is available (Hansen-Turton, 2014).

Individual personality and cognitive style can also play a significant role in the decision-making process. The psychologist Carl Jung placed individuals on a cognitive scale from extroverted to introverted personality types, in which individuals have a distinct preference for the manner in which they organize information and make decisions. According to Jung, the individual that has more extroverted tendencies makes decisions based on people and objects. Those individuals with more introverted tendencies make decisions with more consideration of

thoughts and ideas. Each individual is unique in the manner in which they process the external environment and the information that they receive. Apart from actual observable information, the individual can have distinct preferences for the use of irrational processes, such as the use of intuition regarding a particular situation. The role and use of personal intuition are not often recognized by the individual as the method used for the decision-making process. The individual recognizes patterns in a situation that are similar to past events and applies the same logic and reasoning to the current situation (Henderson, 1980).

In the article, “Critical Imagination: Expanding Consensual Decision-Making Processes in Public Administration”, the author (Zavattaro, 2014) examines the prevalent idea that the best decisions in public administration are a result of decisions that are selected as a result of a consensus. This decision-making method is used in many organizations in order to allow many individuals to be involved in the generation and discussion of ideas, leading to a selection of the perceived best option available to the organization. However, this process can be hindered by interpersonal conflict, manipulation, and the power relationships of the individuals involved in the deliberation of such decisions. When making decisions, public administrators can benefit from an understanding of the political dynamics that can exist in this type of situation in order to handle them more effectively. The concept of a consensus in decision-making presents an image of a homogeneous group of individuals. If everyone within the group was in a natural agreement, then the deliberation process would not be necessary. By taking a broader view of how individuals interact within the group decision-making process, the group is better able to integrate the opinions of individuals with different political and social backgrounds (Zavattaro, 2014).

Group Decision-Making and the Nonprofit

Similar to participatory decision-making, the process of group decision-making allows for the advantage of combined resources and ideas as well as a greater understanding of how stakeholders are impacted by the results of the decision. In the article, “Critical Imagination: Expanding Consensual Decision-Making Processes in Public Administration”, the author examines the prevalent idea that the best decisions in public administration are a result of decisions that are selected as a result of a consensus. This decision-making method is used in many nonprofit organizations to allow many individuals to be involved in the generation and discussion of ideas, leading to a selection of the perceived best option available to the organization. The concept of a consensus in decision-making often presents an image of a completely homogeneous group of individuals. Although this could be considered an ideal circumstance, if everyone within the group was in a natural agreement, then the deliberation process would not be necessary. By taking a broader view of how individuals interact within the group decision-making process, the group is better able to integrate the opinions of individuals with different political and social backgrounds (Zavattaro, 2014).

Disadvantages of Group Decision-Making

Although there are many advantages to the utilization of group decision-making, there are also limitations and disadvantages that must also be considered. Within a group format, participants may feel pressure to conform to predominant ideas that are being expressed or the need to limit information to appeal to group members that exhibit power outside of the immediate group setting, such as a supervisor or manager. Additionally, this decision-making process can be hindered by interpersonal conflict, manipulation, and the power relationships of

the individuals involved in the deliberation of the topics. When making decisions, leaders in public administrators can benefit from an understanding of the political dynamics that can exist in this type of situation to handle them more effectively (De Vita, 2001). Many group decisions suffer from a condition commonly referred to as "groupthink" (Janis, 1972) in which artificial agreement and cohesion are surrounding a particular idea. This deterioration of the judgment process is created by the individual's desire to be accepted and to avoid conflict or disagreement within the group. Additionally, there can also be a tendency for some groups of decision-makers to suffer from polarization between group members. This polarizing effect can occur when two sub-groups develop a unique identity within the group and then begin to interpret information through their identification with a sub-group affiliation (De Vita, 2001).

Cultural and Ethical Implications for Group Decision-Making

The social psychologist Geert Hofstede identified four specific dimensions within the concept of organizational culture, which are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity. All of these dimensions can have a significant impact on the manner in which decisions are made within group dynamics. The ways that alternatives are formulated and the process for selecting among those alternatives is guided by the culture of an organization. Information is often processed differently based on the background of individual group members and the values that they possess (Hofstede, 1980). Organizational leaders have the ability to influence the culture and make positive contributions to the ability of individuals to communicate effectively with each other. Organizations that have a more rigid power structure, due to the nature of the work that is being performed, often struggle with the open communication of information between ranks and departments. In these

situations, the power structure of the organization creates an informational impediment that limits information, and the effectiveness of the decision-making process (Farrow, 1980).

Group decisions in nonprofit organizations often result in significant trade-offs between the available alternatives. The culture of the organization plays an important role in the success of the decision-making process and how the final selection of an alternative should be made. When attempting to succeed in their given environment, the nonprofit organization must consider internal strategies to ensure that the mission of the organization is understood by all members of the group. Although this does not ensure that all group members will envision the mission of the organization, in the same manner, a clearly identifiable mission statement provides an unambiguously stated outline of the values upon which decisions and policies should be formulated. The values and ethics of an organization can also play an important role in group decision-making. Decisions within a group are often made in a manner that is consistent with the ethics of the organization. As a rudimentary standard, most organizations strive to make decisions that are compliant with current existing laws and organizational policies. The use of an ethically committed mission statement can be useful in the development of leaders and other decision-makers that are striving for ethical standards that exceed basic compliance and are moving towards ideals for the organization (Lawry, 1995).

Methods for Group Decision-Making

Successful group decision-making requires members of leadership to avoid many of the common pitfalls that can be incurred in these processes as well as the use of specific techniques to ensure that group decisions are made effectively. The use of brainstorming is a common technique that allows all individuals to share ideas regarding a problem or situation before any type of evaluation from the group is performed. It is important that group leaders do not offer criticism at this stage of the decision process; the goal is simply to collect ideas for future analysis. Some organizations incorporate methods that allow for the ideas and comments to be received anonymously by the participants in order to ensure that participants feel willing to share their ideas openly (Simon, 1944).

A more refined and structured method of brainstorming is performed through nominal group decision-making techniques in which participants are asked to focus their ideas around the production of alternatives to a current methodology and then asked to select one specific method from the alternatives that have been provided by the group. Some leaders also include a *devil's advocate* opinion within the discussion in order to create a richer discussion of the merits of a particular idea. This can be useful in groups that tend to have similar opinions within the group members, forcing the participants to think about the ideas that they are suggesting rather than simply complying with a popular opinion. Some group leaders may also choose to use a method referred to as dialectical inquiry in which the group is asked to respond to two opposing sets of recommendations that have been previously selected by the group leader. This method is useful when leaders of the organization already have adequate information regarding the decision and there are clear options for the organization. This method promotes a dialog of the advantages

and disadvantages of two distinct courses of action and discourages the group from coming to a premature consensus regarding how best to handle a particular situation (Useem, 2005).

The Delphi Method is a particularly useful form of group decision-making in which a panel of experts in a particular area is used to forecast the outcomes of specific decisions. In this method, a leader organizes an anonymous panel of experts and sends out a questionnaire on a given topic. The experts are able to reply to the leader without knowing the identity of the other experts or how they have responded. The leader of this group then compiles these responses and sends the experts a summary of the responses that they have received. This allows the experts to comment on the responses of other individuals without experiencing any type of pressure or influence to change their responses. This process can be done until a consensus is reached or when the leader has decided that they have received enough information to make an independent decision on their own (Loo, 2002).

Many members of leadership have found significant value in the inclusion of staff members in the group decision-making process. Similar to the Delphi Method, leaders can gather information and ideas from colleagues inside of the organization through the use of affinity diagrams, which allow for individuals to anonymously contribute to a flow diagram of ideas that surround a given problem. Access to the diagram can remain open for extended periods of time, allowing individuals within the organization to freely contribute. Members of leadership are able to edit the diagram and make final decisions based on the overall contributions of the group (Jenney, 2009). Additionally, numerous organizations use ongoing quality teams in order to generate ideas regarding an improvement in efficiency and problem-solving. These teams are comprised of existing employees that discuss problem-related to their own jobs and the organization. Since these individuals work in an environment that is related to

the topics of discussion, they are uniquely qualified to generate ideas for members of management regarding how the organization could be improved. Additionally, by being permitted to have this level of input, an organization that facilitates the use of quality teams often have higher morale and lower turnover. Current employees and staff members can also be included in self-managed teams, which provide a broader decision-making capacity than quality teams. Members of leadership often request that self-managed teams discuss new methods related to workflow, assignments of tasks, and scheduling (Simon, 1997).

Similar to the facilitation of quality and self-managed teams, some organizations have employed a less traditional style of group decision-making known as vertical staff meetings. These meetings are organized by inviting a staff member from each department and tier within the organization. By having executive officers, middle managers, and general staff meet as peers, topics can be discussed in the manner with which they impact different areas of the organization. This format allows for the removal of organizational barriers that can prevent members of leadership from obtaining information regarding the organization that may be relevant to the decision-making process. Additionally, it allows for leadership to communicate directly to staff members without the use of intermediary managers that can potentially filter information. These types of groups require that the group leader provides the type of facilitation that allows all members of the group to be treated as equals and that all opinions are treated objectively. The group will not be successful if participants are hesitant to contribute due to the power that other group members have in the organization (O'Connell, 2006).

Data-Driven Decisions

According to the authors of the article “Community Needs Assessment and Data-Supported Decision Making”, the term *data-based decision* can be defined by the use of quantitative or qualitative data to make informed decisions, assuming that the underlying ethical and legal aspects of the decision have been properly considered (Byrnes, 2012). This is distinct from the concept of *data-supported decisions* which uses the same data, but they also take into account people, problems, morals, and comprehensive effects of the community, as a whole. The distinction between these two terms is important in order to avoid an overly data-centered emphasis which can contribute to moral blind spots and a lack of consideration for how the data can most effectively be utilized to improve a given community. Additionally, within this work, the authors stress that it is important to note that not all characteristics of a community can be measured and captured by data. The situational context must also be considered when using this type of information in order to make well-informed and appropriate decisions. Many aspects and characteristics of a community can only be experienced by an individual and cannot be quantified. A researcher has the ability to measure ethnicity and language, however, these do not represent a unique individual context and understanding of the community (Byrnes, 2012).

Nonprofit organizations use data-driven decision-making tools in order to best meet a specific set of needs within the community. Many organizations complete this task at the county or regional level, with each individual unit addressing the community requirements of that area while others use the methodology set forth by a national headquarters or governing body. Inconsistencies in the data collection process, methods used for community needs assessment, and funds allocation processes have raised questions about how decisions are being made and the fairness of given organizational policies. Additionally, many organizations that rely heavily on

donor funding face financial pressure to comply with the wishes of the donor population, applying less emphasis to community needs in the decision process. The research conducted examines how information and decision-making are utilized to identify the community needs of a specific region in order to determine how well those needs are being addressed by the nonprofit organizations in the given area. Based on these findings, the objective of this research is to show how data-driven decision-making can be more effectively utilized to uncover the unmet needs of an area and how newly recognized areas of need can be better served by these nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the research explores the benefits of implementing a universal needs assessment tool, as a critical component of the data-driven decision-making process, that would provide a consistent standard upon which to base resource allocation decisions.

According to the National Association of Community Health Centers article, Community Needs Assessment and Data-Supported Decision Making, data-supported decision-making is a "continuous process of assessing, prioritizing, planning, implementing, evaluating, and reporting" (Byrnes, 2012, p. 3). This process is central to the health of nonprofit organizations and the community. Building this method into a nonprofit organization's infrastructure, finances, and programs will result in value-added benefits for all stakeholders (Byrnes, 2012).

Primary Data

The collection of primary data for the purpose of a community needs assessment involves the individual researcher being the primary collector of data. This allows the researcher to tailor the information gathering efforts and survey questions because they know the purpose of the analysis and the specific information that is needed to complete the research. There are several methodological approaches to conducting primary data collection, including interviews,

telephone surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, and asset inventories. Data-driven needs assessment tools have been implemented successfully by organizations that have been faced with the challenges of higher costs and limited funding. The consistent use of the evaluation tool is useful in helping public administrators make objective comparisons between different programs and opens the lines of discussion between members of leadership regarding how funding should be allocated fairly. The use of assessment tools in the administration of public organizations is critical to the creation of appropriate goals and to the success of the programs that are designed on the implementation of this data (Kluger, 2006).

In Peter Drucker's work, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices*, the author discusses the importance of using strategy and evaluative techniques to ensure that the organization is able to thrive. It is Drucker's contention that many non-profits lack this type of focus. Without the implementation of such techniques, the organization relies on good intentions rather than careful planning and execution. Members of leadership may not recognize that the organization is vulnerable to the same types of challenges that are faced by many organizations. The implementation of this tool provides the organization with increased structure, showing specific areas of opportunity that can be used to develop improvement strategies for the future (Drucker, 1990).

Data-driven decision-making tools have been shown to be critical to the success of an organization. Regardless of whether the organization is a profit-maximizing firm or a nonprofit, in a rapidly changing and complex economy, an organization must continually evaluate how they are allocating energy, time, and other resources. A similar perspective is provided in the article, "Using Community-Based Assessments to Strengthen Nonprofit-Government Collaboration and Service Delivery", in which the author stresses the importance of data-driven decision-making

and advocates the prioritization of needs as a key component to providing service to the community and the management of resources, which are often very limited. As suggested in the article “Using Community-Based Needs Assessments to Strengthen Nonprofit-Government Collaboration and Service Delivery”, an organization must continuously evaluate the manner in which resources are allocated in order to stay connected to the organization's mission and the clients which it serves (Eschenfelder, 2010).

Primary Data and Community Needs Assessment Tools

Researchers at Rotary International stress the importance of data-driven decision-making in the article, “Community Assessment Tools: A Companion Piece to Communities in Action”, stating that the first step in the development of an effective project is measuring the strengths, weaknesses, assets, and needs of the community. In the process of learning about the given community, the researcher can discover the most relevant opportunities for the given projects and maximize the ability to make a meaningful impact. A community needs assessment can be useful in order to acquire a better understanding of the dynamics of the community and can be useful in making important decisions concerning service priorities. For experienced practitioners, an assessment can reveal additional strengths and opportunities for growth and can be beneficial in the development of a new way to address a previously identified concern. Before an assessment is started, the authors advise that researchers should consider the individual specifically want to learn about the community in order to gain new knowledge and address issues that are most critical to the region (Rotary International, 2008).

Performing an assessment also helps stakeholders build valuable relationships and encourages community members to actively participate in making lasting improvements.

The authors stress the fact that this is a critical first step in creating trust, community ownership, and sustainability. The article discusses six assessment methods that can be combined or adapted to best suit available resources and the preferences of the people with which you choose to engage. These methods are community meetings, focus groups, surveys, asset inventories, interviews, and community mapping. According to the article, surveys remain a popular method for assembling information and opinions about the community. Within the context of a community needs assessment, a survey can be an effective way to calculate the community's perceived weaknesses, strengths, existing resources, and requirements. Additionally, surveys can be broad-spectrum or targeted to specific sections of a given population. Typically, this research methodology can be delivered in person or by phone, or by email. In addition to survey research, the article recommends community meetings which can be used as an informal public assembly that brings together members of a local community to discuss issues and express concerns regarding issues that are occurring in the local area. In a community meeting, the role of the organizer is to lead discussions on issues related to the community's strengths and potential challenges and to encourage members of the public to actively participate. The facilitator also has the option to direct any specific questions to recognized subject matter specialists (Rotary International, 2008).

In order to encourage greater community participation in the decision-making process, it is recommended by members of leadership in Rotary International that the organizer appoint a locally respected representative from a community organization to serve as the meeting facilitator; this is particularly true if there are any language or cultural barriers between the researcher and the community being served. The article also recommends that, before organizing a meeting, the researcher should outline objectives to be accomplished and should provide

appropriate preparation time for the facilitator. Interviews can be used as individual conversations between a facilitator and selected community members. This research method allows the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the thoughts and ideas of the respondent. Unlike surveys, interviews give the researcher the ability to move from a set script and ask pertinent follow-up questions, if needed. In contrast to group assessments, the respondent has the complete attention of the interviewer during this process and is more likely to openly share personal information and opinions (Rotary International, 2008).

Community data can also be retrieved through the use of a focus group, which consists of a guided discussion used to determine a targeted community's preferences or opinions on a particular subject or issue. This can be useful in determining how the participants believe that specific community issues should be addressed. According to the article, conducting a focus group often requires extensive planning and an experienced discussion facilitator. The majority of focus groups consist of twelve or fewer participants who are asked a series of open-ended questions on different issues in the community. This approach is useful in encouraging open communication among participants. In this type of research setting, the discussion tends to evolve over time and participants build on each other's responses. An effective focus group will contain a great deal of positive interaction and seem like a cooperative discussion. These types of groups work most effectively in a setting in which the participants are comfortable with both the facilitator and other participants. It may be beneficial to create several different focus groups based on specific demographics within the community (Rotary International, 2008).

Another applicable data source, according to the article, is an asset inventory that identifies various types of resources in a community, environment, people, institutions, and services. In order to conduct this type of inventory, participants the resources that they think are

most valuable and document their findings. The resulting inventory categorizes assets and how they can be used to generate progressive change within the community. The last research tool discussed in the article, community mapping, can be used to reveal different perspectives about a community. Requiring few resources, this activity allows individuals to draw a map of their community, marking certain points of importance and noting how often they visit these places. During this process, a researcher leads a discussion about the maps and records the discussion. An effective community mapping activity allows contributors to identify how they use public resources, compare insights into the significance of various these resources, and produce ideas for community development (Rotary International, 2008).

Data and Evaluative Grid Methodology

Many researchers and practitioners utilize an evaluative grid to organize and measure data for the purposes of decision-making. In the article, “The Program Evaluation Grid: A Planning and Assessment Tool for Nonprofit Organizations”, Kluger (2006) presents tools that are relevant to current research being conducted utilizing the community needs assessment format. The program evaluation grid, as described by Kluger (2006), is a tool that can be utilized by nonprofit organizations in the planning and evaluating of programs. This tool is extremely useful in an environment in which the needs of the organization continue to increase and the financial resources are often limited and contingent upon funding sources, such as the government and private organizations, which are not always consistent. As this situation becomes more predominant in many organizations, there is a need for tools that allow members of leadership to make careful and rational decisions regarding the manner in which funds are allocated.

Critical decisions, regarding the manner in which services are rendered and what services are the most important, must be made in order for the organization to provide the best possible service with the resources that are available. The author of this article became interested in this research topic when their own organization faced financial difficulties and was in a need of a plan to eliminate unnecessary spending and create more value out of the funding which was available to them. This tool became a mainstay for identifying the opportunities and challenges of programs within the organization, periodically being updated to fit the economic climate with which the group was confronted (Kluger, 2006).

The grid rating scale presented by the author contains five values: strategic value, effectiveness/quality, financial value, importance to stakeholders, and market value. Each of these values is broken down into subcategories that distinguish unique and measurable attributes of the given value. The strategic value is the overall fit of the program within the organization's principal goals and mission. This can be used by leadership to identify the core competencies of the program and how it fits into the larger picture of the organization. Quality and effectiveness are used to evaluate how well the program has met the goals the members of leadership have anticipated. This is broken down into areas such as consumer satisfaction, outcome effectiveness, and predetermined indicators of program quality (Kluger, 2006).

The financial value of the program provides valuable data regarding the budget performance over the last several years, the future financial outlook of the program, and the stability of funding sources. Funding that originates in a high percentage of endowments that are not necessarily guaranteed from one year to the next should be considered as an important risk factor to the program's financial stability for future years. The importance of key stakeholders addresses the issue of how well the program meets the needs of those who are served and the

level of availability of the particular services provided. Priority is given to programs that provide unique and highly valued services that are not offered by other organizations within the service area. The last value, the marketing value of the program, assesses the quality of the service that the organization provides in comparison to other organizations that perform a similar function. Additionally, the unit cost per individual who benefits and the demand for the services provided are measured as critical aspects of the component (Kluger, 2006).

The organization can determine a total score for the program by adding the rating across all factors for the given program. This can then be used to produce a rank order of all programs in which the organization is currently engaged. If there are multiple raters, the average score can be used in order to make the results more objective. Using a group rating process is useful to open lines of communication between staff members and encouraging all raters to share their viewpoints on each individual category. If an organization needs to eliminate a program due to financing, those programs in the lowest section of the grid rating scale should be considered first. Additionally, the grid rating scale results provide a starting place for the development of an improvement plan if the program is to be continued. Those programs that scored the highest should be given priority for the organization's resources (Kluger, 2006).

The program evaluation grid has been implemented successfully by organizations that have been faced with the challenges of higher costs and limited funding. The consistent use of the evaluation tool is useful in helping public administrators make objective comparisons between different programs and opens the lines of discussion between members of leadership regarding how funding should be allocated fairly. The use of assessment tools in public administration is critical to the success of the organization and the programs that are being offered. Regardless of whether the organization is a profit-maximizing firm or a nonprofit, in a

rapidly changing and complex economy, an organization must continually evaluate how they are allocating energy, time, and resources. Although the author supports the value of this assessment tool through the success achieved with their own organization, additional support through the presentation of a real or theoretical case study may have strengthened the generalizability and clarity of the research (Kluger, 2006).

Challenges with Primary Data

In the article, “A Comprehensive, Multi-tiered, Targeted Community Needs Assessment Model” by David Finifter and Christine Jensen (2005), the authors discuss the data-driven decision-making benefits that can result from the use of a comprehensive model of community needs assessment. The article outlines several common practices that typically present challenges for researchers who are conducting community needs assessments. The authors then present recommendations for best practices that are intended to resolve some of the most challenging issues that are encountered with this type of study, indicating how these practices can be incorporated into a needs-related assessment model (Finifter, 2005).

In regards to data-related problems that researchers encounter when conducting a community needs assessment, the authors note that many researchers rely on common knowledge, rather than empirical research, in order to solve a given problem, which can often be inaccurate or misleading. Additionally, the authors discuss the risk of examining only a single section of a population. Although this type of data can be informative and useful for some research purposes, there exists a risk of missing key subsamples of the population or overlooking issues that are only experienced by one specific group of individuals. In order to avoid this type of data-related problem, the author recommends collecting information using multiple methods

and originating from multiple sources, including a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, in order to most accurately identify the needs of a given community. Additionally, the article mentions that, in some cases, there is a lack of implementation of the recommended solutions even when a comprehensive method for collecting the information was effectively used in the research (Finifter, 2005)

It is the authors' contention that the act of completing a needs assessment every few years without implementing recommended solutions can be an unnecessary and inefficient strain on the community and organizational resources. Alternatively, an effective needs assessment should be followed by a thorough explanation of the findings. This practice can be an extremely beneficial activity that results in usable data that can be given to others as a tool to address problems and possible solutions that are the best fit for the target population. Additionally, an implementation plan that is integrated within the assessment can be useful for facilitating a smoother transition into the process of problem resolution (Finifter, 2005).

Similar data-related challenges are discussed in the article “Representing your Community in Community-based Participatory Research: Differences Made and Measured”. In this work, the author explains in this article that “community leaders may be able to make differences that cannot be easily measured and academic researchers may know how to measure differences they do not know how to make” (Katz, 2003, p.131). In this sense, the cooperation of both groups allows for a better understanding of community needs and allows for this information to be communicated to others. A successful approach to addressing community needs is to include a wide range of researchers, community leaders, service providers, and members of the target population, which can offer multiple resources and views that are helpful

in understanding the identified community needs and the feasibility of implementing the recommended solutions (Katz, 2003).

Finifter and Jensen (2005) maintain that several shortcomings can be efficiently and effectively resolved by employing a "best practices approach" (Finifter, 2005, p.293) to needs assessments. A best practices approach includes the utilization of empirical evidence from research to identify community needs and potential solutions. Additionally, this process involves the collection of data from multiple groups, including the target population, service providers, and key decision-makers, to perform this type of needs assessment. The authors recommend an action-oriented approach in which a needs assessment is followed by dissemination of findings and implementation of the recommended solutions. It is believed that this will have a positive impact on the community and make improvements in the lives of individuals who are part of the target population and the organizations that serve the community. It is also important to include people of influence from the community as part of a collaborative research team. By using community leaders, service providers, researchers, and members of the target population as contributing associates of the research team, these individuals can add insight into the variables that are relevant to identifying problems and solutions for the target population. Additionally, the inclusion of service providers allows for the transition from research findings to implementation to be less challenging. According to the authors, these best practices can be integrated to generate the assessment model. The process is composed of three components: assessment, dissemination, and implementation. The process should be comprehensive, involving empirical research, and incorporate the opinions of essential community members. The authors predict that the application of the community needs assessment model should improve the quality of

information gathered about the target population as well as improve the quality of life in the community (Finifter, 2005).

Data and the Participatory Research Model

A similar perspective involving the practice of gathering and implementing data from community members is expressed in the article “Community Needs Assessment and Development Using the Participatory Research Model” (Macaulay, 2003). In this article, the author advocates participatory research as a collaborative model that promotes the development of important partnerships and the application of research in order to strengthen the community. Partnerships within the community are useful to produce new knowledge and to solve problems within the given area. These partnerships are often involving organizations and individuals that have distinct areas of influence and expertise within the community that can be used to develop a plan of action-oriented towards problem-solving (Macaulay, 2003).

The participatory research model requires partnership with the community to develop unique involvement to address issues in ways that will be sustainable beyond the period of external funding. According to the author, there are three critical features of the participatory research model. These consist of collaboration during the course of the research process, a reciprocally rewarding informative experience for both community members and researchers, and actions that produce measurable results. It is the author's contention that collaborations encourage the sharing of decision-making ideas throughout the research process. This process often begins with refining the key questions and undertaking the research and leads to the interpretation of the data and cooperatively circulating the results among the stakeholders (Macaulay, 2003).

One of the most critical goals, according to the author, is to assist the community by enhancing community organization's ability to develop skills, applying research outcomes to improve the quality of life of community members, and preparation for anticipated needs. The author feels that, in comparison with more traditional forms of research, the participatory research model more effectively answers the questions that materialize from within communities, which can be an asset to improving community building strategies and overall sustainability. Within the academic and practitioner communities, there is increasing recognition among researchers of the distinction and the importance of participatory research in comparison with the more historical model for community needs development and evaluation, which is often referred to as being a “top-down approach” (Macaulay, 2003, p. 183) to research.

The author believes that, in order for this model to be most effective, an open partnership must develop between scholars and the public in order to achieve specific goals, such as, overcoming difficulties that have existed in the past, outlining pertinent questions, obtaining information to answer these questions, and making certain that research results are applied in the most useful ways. As with many other types of research, community-based research that utilizes the participatory model requires a better understanding among prospective supporters of the three critical attributes that are outlined in the model. As with any new type of research that involves the community, the use of participatory research must include the consideration of ethical issues, such as the protection of individual and community information and the rights of those involved in the research. This type of investigation may require more time to be invested in the startup and development period, due to the time needed to build trust with community members and the need for extensive communication and negotiation between the parties involved (Macaulay, 2003).

SWOT Analysis in Data-Driven Decision Making

In order to effectively evaluate and implement data related to a community's status, many researchers have advocated the use of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis. For the strategic use of data in an increasingly economically competitive environment, Kevin Kearns recommends the use of a SWOT analysis by nonprofit organizations in the article, "From Comparative Advantage to Damage Control: Clarifying Strategic Issues Using SWOT Analysis" (Kearns, 1992). According to Jan Ronchetti in her article, *An Integrated Balanced Scorecard Strategic Planning Model for Nonprofit Organizations* (Ronchetti, 2006), this is a powerful tool that can be extremely useful in the identification of internal strengths and external opportunities in a manner that can be relatively simple to pursue. Although the assessment of organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats have historically been associated with for-profit companies, the growing need for data-based strategic decision-making has made this type of analysis much more popular in nonprofit organizations (Kearns, 1992). The implementation of SWOT analysis has been effectively used in nonprofit organizations for the purpose of building a board of directors, facilitating strategic planning, identifying key stakeholders, and addressing critical financial issues (Smith, 2018).

Many researchers have found that, by understanding community weaknesses and threats, they are better able to identify what processes could be improved and are made aware of possible external threats. This gives researchers and stakeholders an opportunity to develop strategies that more effectively manage or remove them. This type of analysis allows for the development of a strategy that focuses on strengths, minimizes weaknesses, and takes the maximum possible advantage of the opportunities that are available (Ronchetti, 2006). The primary objective for SWOT analysis is to obtain an overall assessment of the external environment as it would pertain

to community-based organizations. So that organization is able to effectively respond to the external environment, the examination of the external environment is conducted first and provides data regarding opportunities and threats. After this is completed, an examination of the internal environment provides data regarding organizational strengths and weaknesses.

According to Kearns (1992), there are two categories of external and internal environments. For both of these categories, it is recommended that researchers search for trends that provide organizations with either the opportunity for growth or threats to the objectives of the organization. This can often vary as a function of perception depending on the organization's mission and its ability to accept the changes that are occurring within the community. The internal environment can consist of factors related to the unique products or services that agencies provide, in addition to factors related to the organization's operational structure or strategy. The author breaks this data down into four resource groups that are integral to every organization. These four data groups are the workforce, finances, technology, and information. Taking into consideration these available resources, many organizations benefit from the examination of factors regarding the ability to provide each of its services. The data that researchers are able to retrieve from the external and internal environments can be analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods or causal models, such as regression analysis (Kearns, 1992).

According to Jan Ronchetti (2006), after a SWOT analysis is successfully completed, the author recommends looking for key strategic ideas that appear to fit into one large category of similar ideas that might span multiple categories of focus. These strategic ideas are a valuable input to the creation of a strategy map using SWOT analysis input in order to examine the organization most effectively. In addition to the SWOT analysis providing valuable information

about how effectively organizations function within the community, it also gives the researchers valuable information that may influence the resolution of other administrative issues (Ronchetti, 2006).

Data Challenges Related to SWOT

According to Kevin Kearns (1992), there are also pitfalls related to data-driven decision-making that nonprofits should be aware of when performing a SWOT analysis. The author refers to the missing link problem, which occurs when researchers and decision-makers attempt to find meaningful relationships between external and internal factors. This can be avoided by extensively analyzing the specifics of these relationships when developing the original list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats through the process of mapping interactions. The process of mapping the interactions between the external and internal factors provides a clearer view of the relationships between these two environments and how their interaction can result in actionable opportunities for the organization (Kearns, 1992).

Adaptations and Alternatives to SWOT Analysis

For many organizations, the approach to strategic decision-making begins with an analysis of the positive and negative attributes of the internal and external environment. Some researchers have noted that the performance of a SWOT analysis places an unnecessary amount of focus on the negative features of the operational environment, namely, the weaknesses and threats. In Silbert and Silbert's article, "Soaring from SWOT: Four Lessons Every Strategic Plan Must Know", the authors stress the importance of removing the negativity associated with weaknesses and threats. These two elements are replaced with aspirations and results, allowing

members of leadership to be forward-thinking and focused on potential rather than obstacles. In this model, the area of aspirations addresses the types of activities that the organization desires to be engaged in and the type of people that they would like to be able to serve. The area of results defines a method of identifying and tracking the organization's progress towards its goals. The authors contend that SWOT is most appropriate for traditional organizations while SOAR would likely be more beneficial for newly developed organizations that may find it challenging to appropriately identify the weaknesses and threats that exist within their environment (Silbert, 2018).

Some researchers have focused on factors that impact the quality of the external environment in which the organization operates. The external forces that can be included in the assessment of the societal environment can be identified through a STEEP analysis. This involves the identification of sociocultural, technological, economic, ecological, and political forces. Depending on the organization and the types of activities in which they are involved, some of these forces may have a significant influence on the decision-making process. Changes to these forces can confront some organizations with threats and opportunities which need to be addressed through strategic decision-making (McGee, 2010).

Decisions that are driven by changes in the external environment can often be presented in the form of competition. Although nonprofit organizations do not frequently compete for financial incentives in the same manner as traditional businesses, competition can occur for many finite resources, such as donors or clients. In Michael Porter's work "The Five Competitive Forces That Shape Strategy", the author discusses the competitive forces that are utilized in corporate strategy. Members of leadership must be able to cope with and understand organizational rivals, suppliers, customers, substitute products, and potential entrants in order to

be competitive. Although the type of activities can be critical to the manner in which an organization competes, the structure of the organization is highly critical to productivity and competition and is essential to effective strategic positioning. The threat of entry holds down the productivity of an organization by increasing the need to invest in newly designed products and services and to make prices competitive. Prospective new entrants have several barriers to entry that Porter describes in detail. The major barriers include supply-side economies of scale, demand-side benefits of scale, capital switching costs, incumbency benefits independent of size, and applicable government policies (Porter, 2008).

External stakeholders can also significantly influence organizational performance by playing industry members off one another, demanding better quality for a particular product or service, or forcing prices down. The author notes that competition between existing firms can take several forms including improvements to service, advertising campaigns, new product initiatives, and price discounting strategies. This type of rivalry can be destructive to organizational productivity because it shifts profits from the company directly to the customer. As influenced by the presence of the five competitive forces, the author states that organizational structure determines the firm's long-term potential due to the fact that it determines how the economic value created by the organization is inevitably divided up. It determines how much the firm is able to retain versus the amount that is passed on to customers, buyers, or sellers of other goods and services. By considering all five of these significant factors, the strategist is able to consider the total structure in mind without being limited to the study of just one factor (Porter, 2008).

According to the author, for every type of organization, these forces are useful in driving decisions as related to competition and productivity. They reveal the underlying root of an

organization's current productivity and provide insights for influencing and anticipating the actions of competitors. These factors are relevant to the nature of productivity regardless of the maturity of the organization, the nature of the organization, or the regulations that impact the firm. Having knowledge of these forces allows for managers to be better equipped at recognizing competition and responding to potential threats to the organization. Additionally, investors are better able to gauge the positive or negative shifts that may occur in organizations before they become critical. Leaders are better able to estimate the long-term productivity of their organization and recognize the formation of threats to their productivity before these issues are an invitation for competitors that are looking for an edge in the market (Porter, 2008).

Internal Organizational Assessment

Similar to the data decision-making process used in a SWOT analysis, the article "Competitive Advantage and Internal Organizational Assessment" discusses internal organizational assessment through the presentation of a four-stage approach to analyzing an organization's internal strengths and weaknesses. The four stages involve surveying, categorizing, investigating, and evaluating the internal environment of the organization. According to the authors, this technique can facilitate strategy formulation through the integration of value chain concepts and the incorporation of the most recent research on internal resources and organizational competencies. The article illustrates how the approach can be functional by members of management as a means for exploring the potential for a competitive advantage that exists within the organization (Duncan, 1998).

According to the article, in the first stage, the analysis of an organization's strengths and weaknesses can be challenging due to the fact that many of these characteristics may have little

bearing on competitiveness when they are fully investigated. Some of these features are somewhat subjective due to the fact that just a small group of individuals perform the analysis. After generating a list of strengths and weaknesses as a part of stage one, it is beneficial to perform an in-depth analysis of the organization's resources and capabilities to better understand what unique opportunities exist and a precise examination of the threats that are occurring internally and externally. The article addresses stage two of this process, stating that, in this stage, potential strengths, and weaknesses are categorized as strategic resources or capabilities, and more specific measures are developed for each. It is the authors' contention that is important because it is these resources and capabilities, along with an organization's purpose and aspirations, which ultimately make it different and suggest the path or paths to sustained competitive advantage (Duncan, 1998).

According to the article, once strategic strengths and weaknesses have been translated into terms of resources and capabilities and the potential for creating competitive advantage is accomplished through systematic categorization, it is important to investigate deeper relationships and determine how and where these factors actually add value. This is the critical objective of stage three, which is identifying the primary or support value activity that possesses the potential for building or losing competitive advantage. The article discusses the modified value-chain as being useful for breaking the organization into its strategically relevant activities in order to understand the behavior of costs and the existing and potential sources of differentiation (Duncan, 1998).

The authors state that understanding the value-chain enables decision-makers to better understand and control the primary cost drivers and differentiate their services by

capitalizing on their unique drivers. According to the article, the most important task for stage four is evaluating competitively relevant resources and capabilities in terms of possible universal strategies. The article uses the example of several for-profit and nonprofit organizations which reveals that many of these organization possesses potential competitive advantages because of unique drivers throughout the corporate value chain, such as inbound and outbound logistics, operations, marketing, as well as organizational infrastructure and technology development. In several examples provided in the article, this evaluation indicates that differentiation strategies are this organization's most promising means of achieving organizational goals. The nature of the economic environment underscores the need for the control of costs and other resources, which is an important requirement regardless of the organization's objective (Duncan, 1998).

Data and the Resource-Based View

Another distinct perspective on data usage for organizational decision-making is expressed in the article "Is the Resource-Based `View` a Useful Perspective for Strategic Management Research?". In this article, the resource-based view of the organization is defined as a management device used to assess the available amount of an organization's strategic assets. This view is based on the concept that the effective and efficient application of all useful resources that the company can assemble is useful in determining its sustainable advantages. This perspective on information usage is similar to that of a SWOT analysis. According to this viewpoint, researchers and members of leadership must identify and classify the organization's resources in terms of strengths and weaknesses (Priem, 2001).

Organizational leaders and researchers should combine the organization's strengths into core competencies and specific capabilities. There should be an appraisal of the overall potential

of these capabilities and competencies in terms of their potential for sustainable competitive advantage and the ability to harvest the benefits resulting from their use. Members of leadership should select the strategy that best exploits the organization's capabilities and competencies relative to external opportunities. Additionally, the organization's leadership should identify the resource gaps and invest in upgrading weaknesses. Similar to an organizational analysis, the perspective supports the idea that competitive implications of organizational resources such as human capital, culture, knowledge, and teamwork allow for the sustained advantage of organizations and these areas are significant to the core of resource-based analysis (Priem, 2001).

Data Challenges in community assessments

There are several challenges that are often involved in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. For community assessments, the most difficult challenge may be obtaining comprehensive data on your certain target populations, depending on the groups on which researchers choose to focus. The strategic use of data for analysis typically requires comprehensive and high-quality datasets. Many of the datasets from government agencies are comprehensive and they allow the researcher to draw comparisons across several population groups and periods of time. However, the researcher should be aware of the possibility of bias and other limitations that may exist for this type of data. An example of this bias could be racial or ethnic data that is assigned by the researcher rather than being volunteered by the participant. If the researcher's assignment is the only available option, the method of data gathering should be noted when the data is being used (Byrnes, 2012).

The presentation and interpretation of data can present another challenge for researchers. In regard to the presentation of data, there are many popular options that are used to graphically display the information, such as heat maps, pie charts, and bar graphs. Although this can be a useful way to communicate large amounts of numerical data, these representations can be misleading if they do not present that data in an accurate manner. Since statistical information and graphical presentations can be manipulated to present the conclusion that the researcher was attempting to draw out from the data, it is important to be aware of the accuracy of the presentation. Another challenge involving the use of data-supported decision-making is the requirements for additional resources, such as time and staffing to ensure the quality and the comprehensiveness of the work that is being performed. It is important that the researcher provides proper consideration in regard to the amount and type of resources needed to perform all aspects of the data collection, interpretation, and analysis involved in the project (Byrnes, 2012).

Identifying Relevant and Diagnostic Data

In the article, “A Conceptual Framework for Data-Driven Decision Making” (Gill, 2014), the author notes that, in order to be useful to both the researcher and the practitioner, data should be relevant to the given decision-maker and useful for the issues that the data is intended to address. If too much irrelevant data is included, research methodology often becomes convoluted and the data sets become difficult to successfully manage. According to the author, different types of data are relevant to different types of decision-makers. For each type of decision-maker, the relevance of data can depend on the specific area of focus and the overall purpose of the information needed. The exact needs can how frequently the data needs to be

updated in order to be relevant and useful and the amount of detail required for the specific project (Gill, 2014).

Practitioners that work directly with individuals in the community may need datum that is fine-grained in order to isolate very specific characteristics and use these data to quickly adjust tasks related to their jobs. For these individuals, annual or other long-term reports that provide generalized information may be of relatively little use for implementation. Comparatively, decision-makers at higher levels in a given system characteristically need data that are grouped into much larger units of analysis, and the decisions of these individuals often do not require data that are updated as quickly or frequently. Larger scale decisions, such as those concerning long-range strategy are not made on a daily basis and therefore do not require data that are updated daily. Additionally, these types of higher decision-makers are likely to need a wider range of types of data. The significance of the data to the decision that is being made and the decision-maker does not necessarily mean that will produce the best result for a particular situation. Data that is related to the achievements of the organization could be relevant to the assessment of the organization, however, if it is analyzed in an incorrect manner, it could result in incorrect conclusions regarding the current performance or how performance could be improved. Data has the potential to be diagnostic for some decisions but not for other decisions. For the data to be diagnostic, it must be both valid and reliable for that particular decision. Reliable data, when it is measured repeatedly, does not have a large random variation. Unreliable data lack stability and the quality needed for interpretation because they involve so much random variation (Gill, 2014).

The author notes that the researchers and decision-makers within a given organization can be misled by the randomness of data and there is a tendency to seek out patterns in data even if there are no real patterns present. According to the author, reliability tends to be a bigger

challenge for measurements that focus on changes or differences in other underlying measurements. For example, the measurement of distinct achievement gains for the organization versus achievement levels. The act of subtracting one outcome from another outcome makes the random variation in each of the two measurements a larger proportion of the remaining numerical value. Even when data is reliable, they may not be valid for proving correct information that is relevant for the decision at hand. Data that are incorrectly interpreted can lead to invalid inferences that are prejudiced and can cause decision-makers to draw incorrect conclusions. It is the author's contention that, being driven by data requires much more than the existence of an effective data infrastructure, the accessibility of the data, and a culture of data use. Additionally, it is important to ensure that data is applicable and diagnostic for each decision-maker and decision. If the researcher is not cognizant of this issue, there is a high possibility that they will be driven in the incorrect direction or that they will be overcome by the complexity of the data (Gill, 2014).

While many approaches to data-supported decision-making exist, the unique characteristics and operation of each organization must dictate the approach used to move the organization toward fulfilling its overall mission. The use of the data supported decision-making strategies provides an innovative option to many nonprofit organizations that have been challenged by strategic planning models applicable to their distinctive planning requirements. The use of these types of tools or an alternative integrated solution, in which data-supported decision-making supplements another strategic planning model already in use, is an option for those nonprofits seeking to plan with the efficiency and precision of private sector organizations while remaining committed to meeting the unique needs of all stakeholders (Gill, 2014).

Data and Measurements

Nonprofit organizations throughout a given region of focus attempt to allocate funds in order to best meet a specific set of needs within the community. Many organizations complete this task at the county or regional level, with each individual unit addressing the community requirements of that area while others use the methodology set forth by a national headquarters or governing body. Inconsistencies in the methods used for community needs assessment and funds allocation processes have raised questions about the fairness of given organizational policies. Additionally, many organizations that rely heavily on donor funding face financial pressure to comply with the wishes of the donor population (Witkin, 1995).

This research examines the community needs of a specific region, northwestern Pennsylvania, in order to determine how well current needs are being addressed by the nonprofit organizations in this area. The objective of the research is to uncover the unmet needs of this area and how they can be better served by these nonprofit organizations. Additionally, the research explores the benefits of implementing a universal needs assessment tool that would provide a consistent standard upon which to base funding decisions. The following research methodology description provides a framework for the capstone project, highlighting the relevance of the investigation, the methodology that is used, data collection, analysis, and the limitations of each component of the research.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Research was conducted through the use of an online survey that addresses the general population as well as organizational leaders of the northwestern Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations, specifically, managers, members of the Board of Directors, and officers. The survey asks the respondent to rate how important specific community needs are and how well they are being addressed in their region. Through the completion of this survey, leaders in nonprofit organizations have the opportunity to complete sections that address the respondent's role in the organization, their view of the organization's effectiveness, and the current community needs assessment processes used by the organization for which they are employed.

When the survey was conducted, the original goal was for the collection of one thousand responses. After approximately one year of actively promoting the survey, 714 responses were gathered within the region. For the purposes of this research, the term *Northwestern Pennsylvania area* are defined as Erie, Crawford, Mercer, and Venango counties. The needs assessment process is utilized to determine the allocation of donor funds for each fiscal year. The research is used to compare the methodology used by each agency, identifying the reasoning for the process and the achievement of outcomes. Additionally, an internet survey of residents of the Northwestern Pennsylvania region is utilized to gather data regarding perceived community needs.

Linking the results of the survey with the data gathered from members of organizational leadership, the research addresses areas of unaddressed need in the community and opportunities that exist within the nonprofit organization's chapter to address these issues. The current methodologies used by the targeted nonprofits have been beneficial in gathering information from both donors and recipient agencies. However, both of the current approaches lack

objectivity and presence of the possibility of bias interfering with the assessment of need and the importance of the organization's work. Considering some of the inconsistent outcomes that have resulted from current methodologies for fund allocation that are used by various nonprofit organizations, the research addresses questions regarding how the organization would benefit from the implementation of a universal needs assessment tool across the organization's chapters. Specifically, the implementation of this tool provides increased transparency to donors and recipient agencies and it would more accurately assess community needs. This results in a heightened relationship between donors, agencies, and recipients, opening clearer lines of communication regarding community needs and how they can best be satisfied (Zavattaro, 2014).

General Population Survey

A general population survey is conducted asking respondents to rate needs on a five-point Likert scale based on the level of importance and how well the need is being served in the community. This scale measures the perceived level of importance and the perceived level of service for each of the described societal needs areas. This data provides the framework for the perceptual map and statistical analysis that reveals potential areas of unmet need within the community. An internet survey is used to collect data from the general population of residents located in northwestern Pennsylvania. Links to the survey were made available through websites that are associated with the northwestern Pennsylvania area. For the survey, the personal identity of the respondents is not disclosed. The respondents are provided with a consent document before any data is collected requiring their acknowledgment that they understand that their

participation is voluntary, that the information is kept confidential, by default, through the absence of personal data collection, and that they will not be financially compensated.

Organizational Leadership

For the leadership survey portion of data collection, respondents are asked identical questions regarding the importance and how well areas of need are being served in the community. In addition to this, the respondents involved in nonprofit organizations were presented with the option to provide information regarding the core need that their organization serves, how they perceive their own organization, their role in the organization, and the funds' allocation process that is currently being used by their organization. The subjects include members of the Board of Directors for each chapter of the nonprofit organization and points of contact for partner organizations.

The targeted agencies for the survey are: The United Way of Erie County, The United Way of Western Crawford County, The Second Harvest Food Bank, The Nonprofit Partnership, Hamot Health Foundation, YMCA of Greater Erie, Meadville Family YMCA, Oil City YMCA, Make-A-Wish Greater PA, Erie City Mission, Allegheny College, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Erie Regional Growth Partnership, American Red Cross of NWPA, ARC of Crawford County, Center for Family Services, Family Services of NWPA, Girl Scouts of Western Pennsylvania, Young Leaders Society, Salvation Army, Salvation Army Thrift Store, and Women's Services, Inc. Contact information for these individuals is disclosed through the majority of nonprofit organization's websites. They were contacted initially through email or phone, presented with information regarding the purpose of the research, and invited to participate in the survey.

Survey Limitations

Although the Likert scale format has many advantages, including being common and easily understood by the general population, this presentation of the question may influence some respondents to make a selection regarding an area that they do not have adequate knowledge. Additionally, attitudes regarding these issues may exist on a more complex continuum that is being reduced to a five-point scale on which the points are equidistant from each other. The scale does not allow for the inclusion of the “How?” or “Why?” behind the response, limiting the depth of analysis of the responses (Nagle, 1993).

Confidentiality

In accordance with institutional review board guidelines, all participants were provided with information regarding the nature of the research and the confidentiality of the information. For the internet survey, the website contains a start page that includes a description of the research, its purpose, and a confidentiality statement. The respondent must acknowledge each of these areas by selecting an “I accept” or “I understand” radio button before the survey will begin. Failure to acknowledge all of the sections prevents the survey from commencement. This is presented as a digital version of the informed consent form. For the use of written surveys, participants are provided with an informed consent cover letter that includes a description of the research, its purpose, and a confidentiality statement. Respondents are asked to mark each of these sections with a checkmark indicating that they accept or understand the content of the

section. Please see Appendix A for IRB Approval and Appendix B for the Informed Consent Form.

Data Collection

The procedures involve the collection of primary data through the use of an internet survey for the general population. The focus groups were scheduled with board members and community leaders at a time and place convenient for the respondent. The focus groups require the collection of more complex data, being that the respondents are being asked to describe the funds allocation process being used by the organization. These appointments were set by use of telephone calls and letters written to the given agency, explaining the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the information. Respondents were given the option to complete the survey solely by mail or phone if a personal meeting cannot be scheduled. Nonprofit leaders were asked questions regarding the importance of various community needs and how well these needs are being addressed. Additionally, they will be asked about their organization's needs assessment process and funds allocation methods.

The internet survey focused on the general population and was available through websites that target the northwestern Pennsylvania region, as previously specified. Email invitations that include a link to the survey were sent to individuals within the region. The general population internet survey was included questions regarding the importance of various community needs and how well these needs are being addressed. The data collection period took place over several months until the target sample size, mentioned previously, is accomplished.

Potential Risks

In regard to data collection, the risk of a breach of confidentiality in the form of exposing personal identities or information is an identifiable concern when conducting this type of research. This risk is minimized through the use of an anonymous opinion-based survey, the data for which is secured on password-protected software. Study procedure risk, which could take the form of inconveniencing or causing negative emotional experiences for the participants, is minimal. However, this risk was addressed by confirming the participant's availability via a phone conversation and working within their schedule to complete the survey. Additionally, this type of research can pose the risk of an invasion of privacy. This risk is minimal and was addressed through the informed consent form which was useful in educating the participants regarding the nature of the research and the confidentiality of the information.

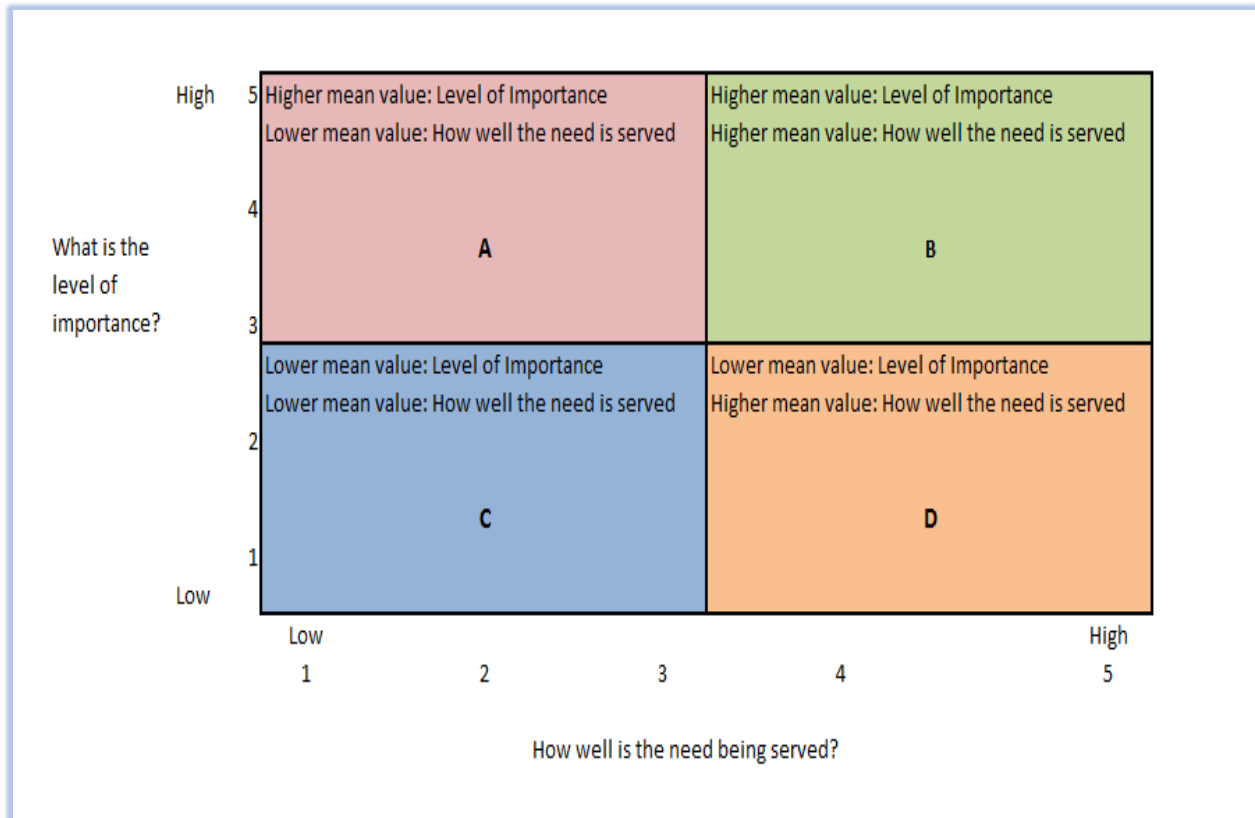
Data Analysis

The demographic information collected on the survey allows for the data to be separated by the respondent's age, gender, marital status, and whether or not they have children. This information provided response distributions for each of the demographic variables, indicating how each of these factors influenced the assessment of need. Additionally, this could uncover trend lines based on this criterion as well as uncover the existence of bias within the sample population. For those that identified themselves as being affiliated with a nonprofit organization, the data provides response frequencies for each type of organization that participated in the survey. Additionally, the data allows for the determination of the existence of self-serving bias in the responses from individuals within specific types of organizations. In order to accomplish this, frequency distributions of each need rating for those individuals not associated with a specific

need were compared to responses from individuals who are associated with the needs area. The existence and amount of a skewed distribution for associated responses provided a measure for this bias.

Perceptual Mapping

Each need level identified in the survey produced two variables, “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?”. The difference between the mean value of these two variables indicates a quantifiable *gap* if the value is negative, indicating a high level of importance in comparison to how well the need is being served. This difference provides a basis for recognizing unmet or underserved areas of need within the community. A positive difference indicates that resources are being allocated to an area that is not viewed as comparatively important to the community. The survey categories “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?” provides the framework for a four-quadrant perceptual map of all of the categorical need areas included in the survey. The mean value of each needs area places that area on the perceptual map, as depicted below (Figure 1).

Figure 1

These four quadrants provide a framework for creating recommendations based on how each of the needs is perceived by the respondents in regard to the level of importance and how well it is being served in the community.

General conclusions for each of the quadrants could be stated, as follows:

Quadrant A: Needs that are recognized as critical issues within the region which are currently not being handled appropriately.

Quadrant B: This grouping is indicative of needs that are being addressed in an appropriate manner. The operational manner in which these needs are being met could be used as an

example of how underserved issues could be better addressed. Although the needs that fall into this quadrant are viewed as being appropriately addressed, their importance should make them a continued consideration for the future.

Quadrant C: This group of needs is indicative of needs that are receiving a high amount of attention; however, they are not recognized as important issues by respondents.

Quadrant D: Needs that fall into this area are recognized as low priority issues that respondents believe are being treated appropriately.

Although this portion of the analysis provides a generalized and useful grouping for responses, there are limitations inherent with this type of examination.

Limitations to Perceptual Mapping

One of the limitations to perceptual mapping is the number of variables that are utilized. For the purpose of this research, two variables are used to present each of the identified needs within the two axes of the matrix. Although this provides a visual and comparative presentation of the perceptions of respondents, it does not allow for the existence of other variables that may be influencing the responses that were provided by these individuals. Additionally, the presentation of each ranking on a five-point Likert scale may create large groupings of data that are not clearly distinguishable from each other. Needs that fall very close to the center or to a quadrant border line may be difficult to clearly assess as meeting the requirements of that group (Steenkamp, 1994).

Paired Sample T-Tests

Using the survey data, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the means of “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?” in order demonstrate the hypothesis that there is statistically significant evidence that the mean difference between these two response types is significantly different from each other. A statistically significant difference between the two responses suggests a recognizable disconnect between the perceived level of importance of a needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

For each needs area, a hypothesis can be stated, as follows:

$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ ("the paired sample means are equal")

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ ("the paired sample means are not equal")

For this hypothesis, μ_1 is the sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and μ_2 is the sample population mean of “How well served?”. The category “Level of Importance?” represents how respondents rated the importance of a particular needs area on a scale of 1 to 5. The category “How well served?” represents how respondents rated their level of satisfaction with the quality of service delivery for a specific needs area in their community based on a scale of 1 to 5.

Limitations of Paired Sample T-Tests

This type of analysis is limited by the fact that it only describes the relationship between variables in a limited manner in that it does not attempt to imply causality. The establishment of causality would be a significant asset to this type of research, and it required extra effort throughout the project to avoid making these types of implications regarding the relationships between variables. Additionally, this analysis can be unstable outside of the specific parameters for which the research data was obtained. For example, the relationship between the variables may not be the same for previous or future time periods (Chatterjee, 2000).

Qualitative Analysis of Focus Group Data

The analysis of the focus group data begins immediately after the data has been collected and results in a report based on the handwritten notes and a transcription of the audio. The audio transcription is assisted with the use of transcription software or peripheral controls if the transcription requires manual interpretation. For each of the questions that are discussed during the focus group session, it is important to focus on the major themes and ideas that have emerged (Morgan, 1997). Since there are large amounts of data from the focus group sessions, it is important to code speech into different categories in order to determine if patterns exist in the data. The initial coding involves the recognition of categories codes throughout the responses and applying labels that were useful in sorting the data. After the initial coding is completed, focused coding is used to combine or separate different types of categorical data (Kitzinger, 1995).

Some of the most useful coding categories involve the setting and context of the subjects or data, the perspective of the respondents, the opinions of the respondents regarding other

individuals or information, activities and behavior that occurring during the session, strategies discussed by the respondents, and method codes that identify research methods that are being used during the project (Bogdan, 1998). Specialized software programs, as well as Word and Excel, are useful in coding the focus group data and in the creation of identifiable relationships that can be used later in the research.

Limitations of Focus Groups

The limitations of utilizing focus groups typically involve the relatively small sample size of the population, which may not be representative of the population as a whole. This is problematic given the nature of this research and due to the fact that the focus group is intended to reflect a highly selective group of individuals. Another challenge involves the control of the discussion within the session. It was important to create highly structured questions and session formats that limit the amount of time that could be wasted on topics that are not relevant to the research. Additionally, another common challenge with focus groups is the existence of peer pressure influencing the manner in which individuals respond to the questions. Some people may also feel the need to censor their answers due to the presence of an audience with which they are not familiar (Morgan, 1997).

Qualitative research plays a critical role in the completion of the overall research project on data-driven decision-making in nonprofit organizations. Beginning with the highly quantitative and positivist data that was made available in the general population survey and then utilizing this data for content of the focus groups, qualitative data analysis plays an increasingly important role in making the data useful to nonprofit organizations. This type of analysis provided real meaning to the data and provide a direction for application within the nonprofit community. This continuing research project explores ways in which qualitative and

quantitative methods can be used together in order to provide meaningful applications that can benefit the community (Bogdan, 1998).

Through the use of qualitative and quantitative research tools, the overarching goal of the proposed research examines the community needs of a specific region in order to determine how well current needs are being addressed by the nonprofit organizations in this area. The previously specified methodology was used to uncover the unmet needs of this area and how they can be better served by these nonprofit organizations. The investigation explores and provides meaningful insights that highlight the benefits of implementing a universal needs assessment tool that would provide a consistent standard upon which to base funding decisions. The completion of the research culminates with a presentation of information and recommendations to applicable nonprofit organizations in order to provide significant benefit to the organizations to enhance understanding of community needs (Kitzinger, 1995).

Chapter 4: Results

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis

An online general population survey was completed with a total of 714 responses in which participants were asked to rate needs on a five-point Likert scale based on the level of importance and how well the need is being served in the community. The descriptive statistics provided below, indicate the nature of the sample population. The demographic information collected on the general population survey allowed for the data to be separated by the respondent's gender, marital status, ethnicity, household income, education, community involvement, and age. This information provided response distributions for each of the demographic variables, indicating how each of these factors influenced the assessment of need.

In the tables below (Tables 2-13), the *Frequency* column indicates the number of responses for each category. The column titled *Percent* is used to represent the percentage of all respondents involved in that portion of the survey including any missing cases that may have occurred due to a non-response for a specific question. The column titled *Valid Percent* represents the percentage from only completed questions from the respondents. The similarity between these columns illustrates how completely the surveys were performed. The *Cumulative Percent* column adds the percentages of each response category, illustrating that the total is equal to one hundred percent.

As shown in the tables below (Tables 2 and 3), the respondents tended to be predominantly female and younger than the general population. Although the percentage of women in the United States is 50.5% (Pew, 2012), the first table shows that 60.8% of the

respondents of the general population survey were female and that 38.4% of the respondents were male.

Table 1

What is your gender?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	6	.8	.8	.8
Female	434	60.8	60.8	61.6
Male	274	38.4	38.4	100.0
Total	714	100	100	

From the results of the survey (Table 3), it can also be noted that the sample population was, on average, younger than the general population. Comparatively, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 8.4% of the population of the United States falls in an age range of 18 to 24, 13.3% falls in an age range of 25 to 34, 13.2% falls in an age range of 35 to 44, 14.6% falls in an age range of 45 to 54, 11.8% falls in an age range of 55 to 64, 7.0% falls in an age range of 65 to 74 and 6.3% falls in an age range of 75 or older (U.S Census Bureau, 2016). The results of the demographic data provided below show that the sample population is highly representative of individuals under the age of 55, comprising 87.6% of the sample population (Table 3).

Table 2

What is your age?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	6	.8	.8	.8
18 to 24	123	17.2	17.2	18.1
25 to 34	233	32.6	32.6	50.7
35 to 44	144	20.2	20.2	70.9
45 to 54	126	17.6	17.6	88.5
55 to 64	66	9.2	9.2	97.8
65 to 74	14	2.0	2.0	99.7
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

According to a Pew Research Center survey that was conducted in 2012, approximately one in five adults classified themselves as “single, never married” (Pew, 2012). This varies significantly from the sample population of this survey in which 34.7% of the respondents identified with this classification (Table 4).

Table 3

Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	4	.6	.6	.6
Divorced	98	13.7	13.7	14.3
Domestic partnership or civil union	30	4.2	4.2	18.5
Married	206	28.9	28.9	47.3
Separated	30	4.2	4.2	51.5
Single, cohabitating	90	12.6	12.6	64.1
Single, never married	248	34.7	34.7	98.9
Widowed	8	1.1	1.1	100
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

The United States Census Bureau reported in the American Community Survey that, as of 2015, 63.6% of the United States population identifies as White, 12.6% identifies as Black, 5.1% identifies as Asian, and 17.1% identify as Hispanic (American Community Survey, 2015). The population for the survey prominently identified themselves as white, 87.5%, with 5.9% of the sample identifying as Black, .6% identifying as Asian and 3.4% identifying as Hispanic.

Table 4

Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	19	2.7	2.7	2.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	.6	.6	3.2
Black or African American	42	5.9	5.9	9.1
Hispanic	24	3.4	3.4	12.5
White/Caucasian	625	87.5	87.5	100.0
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2016, 28.2% of survey responders stated that their household income was \$25,000 or less, 23.1% stated that their household income was \$25,000 to \$50,000, 18.5% stated that their household income was \$50,000 to \$75,000, 10.5% stated that their household income was \$75,000 to \$100,000 and 16.3% stated that their household income was over \$100,000 (U.S Census Bureau, 2016). Comparatively, the general population survey showed that 21.6% of survey responders stated that their household income was \$25,000 or less, 18.3% stated that their household income was \$25,000 to \$50,000, 19.5% stated that their household income was \$50,000 to \$75,000, 14.0% stated that their household

income was \$75,000 to \$100,000 and 24.1% stated that their household income was over \$100,000. The largest difference for the sample survey data was for the over \$100,000 category, in which a significantly larger percentage of individuals responded to the survey than would be represented by the population (Table 6).

Table 5

What is your approximate average household income?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	18	2.5	2.5	2.5
\$0-24,999	154	21.6	21.6	24.1
\$25,000-\$49,999	42	5.9	5.9	38.4
\$50,000-\$74,999	24	3.4	3.4	42.9
\$75,000-\$99,000	100	14.0	14.0	45.1
\$100,000-\$124,999	102	14.3	14.3	45.7
\$125,000-\$149,999	32	4.5	4.5	48.2
\$150,000-\$174,999	16	2.2	2.2	66.5
\$175,000-\$199,000	4	.6	.6	86.0
\$200,000 +	18	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

According to the United States Census Bureau, 19.6% of the U.S. population reported that their highest level of educational attainment was less than a high school diploma, 28.6% reported that they had received a high school diploma or GED but had not attended any future education, 21.0% reported that they had attended some college (no degree), 6.3% reported that they had received an Associate's degree, 15.5% reported that they had received a Bachelor's degree and 8.9% reported that they had received a Graduate or Professional degree (U.S Census Bureau, 2016). Comparatively, of those that responded to the general population survey, 6.2% reported that their highest level of educational attainment was a high school diploma or GED,

43.1% reported that they had attended some college (no degree), 9.0% reported that they had received an Associate’s degree, 22.4% reported that they had received a Bachelor’s degree and 17.8% reported that they had received a Graduate or Professional degree. Due to the omission of a survey response category, data was not collected on those that reported their highest level of educational attainment was less than a high school diploma.

Table 6

What is the highest level of education that you have completed or the highest degree that you have received?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	11	1.5	1.5	1.5
High School diploma or GED	44	6.2	6.2	7.7
Some college but no degree	308	43.1	43.1	50.8
Associate degree	64	9.0	9.0	59.8
Bachelor’s Degree	160	22.4	22.4	82.2
Graduate Degree	127	17.8	17.8	100.0
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

In a Pew Research Center phone survey, 75% of respondents claimed to be actively involved in a community organization (Pew, 2011). In comparison, the general population survey showed that 42.2% of respondents claimed to be affiliated with a community organization, 23.5% of the respondents stated that they had been involved in the past and 33.8% stated that they had never been affiliated with a community organization. It is important to note that the wording of the question for the Pew Research Center and that of the general population survey are not the same. Although the information could be used for meaningful comparison, “active involvement” and “affiliated” could represent two different meanings for the participants of these surveys.

Table 7

Are you affiliated with any community organizations?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	4	.6	.6	.6
No	241	33.8	33.8	34.3
Previously, but not currently involved	168	23.5	23.5	57.8
Yes	301	42.2	42.2	100
Total	714	100.0	100.0	

Participants that had expressed that they had previous or current involvement in community organizations were invited to answer additional questions regarding their experience. This section of the survey received a total of 100 responses. The tables below show the range of organizations involved in the survey, as well as levels of experience and opinions on their organization. When asked about their job role, 50% of respondents identified themselves as volunteers, while 20% stated that their role was that of Team Lead and 5% indicated that they were members of senior management.

Table 8

What, most closely, describes your job role or title?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>Valid</i>	3	3.0	3.0	3.0
Junior Manager	6	6.0	6.0	9.0
Manager	5	5.0	5.0	14.0
Organizer	5	5.0	5.0	19.0
Other	6	6.0	6.0	25.0
Senior Manager	5	5.0	5.0	30.0
Team Leader	20	20.0	20.0	50.0
Volunteer	50	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Related to job role, respondents were asked to identify their level of decision-making authority or influence. The majority of individuals (51%) selected minimal decision-making or influence while significant and moderate influence was chosen by 25% and 24% of these individuals, respectively.

Table 9

What level of decision-making authority do you have for your organization?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Minimal decision-making authority	51	51.0	51.0	51.0
Moderate decision-making authority	24	24.0	24.0	75.0
Significant decision-making authority	25	25.0	25.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

When asked about the length of time that the individual was with this organization, 28% of respondents stated that this was 1-3 years and 35% of respondents stated 3-5 years. None of the respondents indicated that they had been with the organization for more than 15 years.

Table 10

How long have you been with this organization?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1-3 years	28	28.0	28.0	28.0
3-5 years	35	35.0	35.0	63.0
5-7 years	5	5.0	5.0	68.0
7-10 years	15	15.0	15.0	83.0
10-15 years	5	5.0	5.0	88.0
More than 15 years	12	12.0	12.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

For each of the following questions (Tables 12-14), the participant was asked on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 how much they agreed or disagree with the following statements. For these questions, 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree. Any numbers omitted from the results indicate that no participants provided that specific rating. In Table 12, the responses are displayed for the statement “My organization has a clearly defined mission statement”. The results show that all participants responded in the range of 3 to 5.

Table 11

My organization has a clearly defined mission statement.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
3 (Neither Disagree nor Agree)	23	23.0	23.0	23.0
4	43	43.0	43.0	66.0
5 (Strongly Agree)	34	34.0	34.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

When participants were presented with the statement “My organization addresses important needs in the community” (Table 13), all participants responded in the range of 3 to 5 with 77% of these responses being a 5 (strongly agree).

Table 12

My organization addresses important needs in the community.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
3 (Neither Disagree nor Agree)	12	12.0	12.0	12.0
4	11	11.0	11.0	23.0
5 (Strongly Agree)	77	77.0	77.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

When presented a statement regarding the effectiveness of their organization in the assessment of community needs, it can be noted that none of the respondents provided a rating of 1 or 5 and that 54% of the participants provided a rating of 3 (neither agree or disagree).

Table 13

My organization assesses community needs effectively.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1 (Strongly Disagree)	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
3 (Neither Disagree nor Agree)	12	12.0	12.0	12.0
4	54	54.0	54.0	66.0
5 (Strongly Agree)	34	34.0	34.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

The Needs Gap and Perceptual Mapping

From the results of the general population survey, each need identified produces two variables, “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?”. The difference between the mean values of these two variables indicates a quantifiable “gap” in which a higher positive value indicates a high level of importance in comparison to how well the need is being served. This difference provides a basis for recognizing unmet or underserved areas of need within the community. A negative difference indicates that resources are being allocated to an area that is not viewed as comparatively important to the community. From the table below, it can be noted that Mental Health-Related Services has the largest positive needs gap (1.38), and that Recreational Services has the smallest and negative needs gap (-.12).

Table 14

The mean difference between “importance” and “How well served” indicating a perceived gap

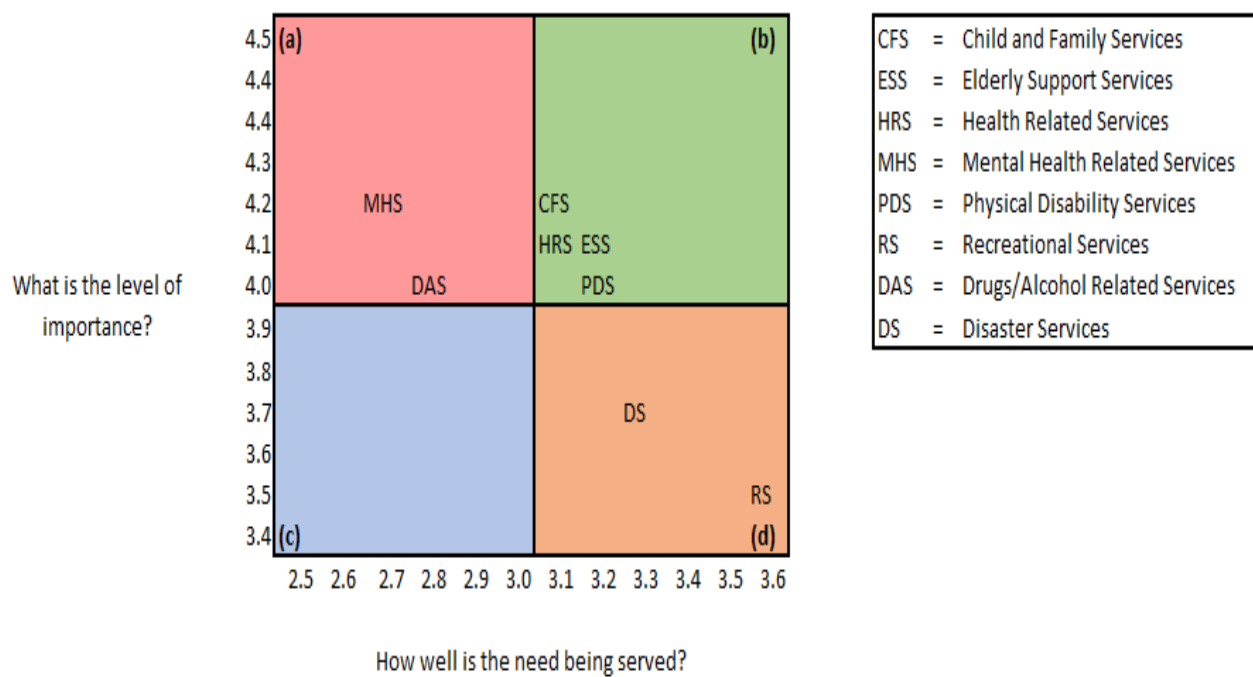
<i>(1 = Lowest Importance/Least well served) (5 = Highest Importance/ Best Served)</i>	Mean	Perceived needs gap
Child and Family Services – Importance	4.28	1.19
Child and Family Services – How well served	3.09	
Elderly Support Services – Importance	4.10	.90
Elderly Support Services – How well served	3.20	
Health-Related Services – Importance	4.21	1.10
Health-Related Services – How well served	3.11	
Mental Health-Related Services – Importance	4.14	1.38
Mental Health-Related Services – How well served	2.76	
Physical Disability Services Importance	4.03	.84
Physical Disability Service – How well served	3.19	
Recreation Services – Importance	3.48	-.12
Recreation Service – How well served	3.60	
Drug/Alcohol-Related Services – Importance	3.96	1.12
Drug/Alcohol-Related Services – How well served	2.85	
Disaster Services – Importance	3.71	.43
Disaster Services – How well served	3.29	

The survey categories “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?” provide the framework for a four-quadrant perceptual map of all the categorical need areas included in the survey.

The mean value of each needs area places that area on the perceptual map, as shown below.

Figure 2

Perceptual Map of Needs Areas



The overall conclusions for each of the four Sections can be indicated, as follows:

“Section A” (Red): These are needs that are recognized for their importance. However, in comparison to other needs areas, they are not currently being addressed in the most appropriate manner. The areas that fall under this category are Mental Health-Related Services and Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services. These areas should be critical areas for the community to examine how resources could be utilized in a manner that would better address these areas.

“Section B” (Green): In comparison with other areas, the needs in this section are indicative of issues perceived as being appropriately addressed by nonprofit organizations. The areas that fall under this category are Child and Family Services, Health Related Services, Elderly Support Services, and Physical Disability Services. The ways in which these needs are being addressed could be used as an example of how other, unmet needs, can be better addressed by nonprofit organizations. Although the needs that fall into Section B are viewed as being appropriately addressed, they should remain a priority for organizations that are currently addressing these needs.

“Section C” (Blue): These are needs that are recognized, in comparison with other areas, as being of low importance and they are not being well addressed within the community. Since they are viewed as a lower priority, these needs do not warrant significant attention. However, if there is a surplus of given resources after more important needs have been addressed, these needs can also benefit from increased attention. None of the needs related areas fell into this category in comparison to with other the other areas.

“Section D” (Orange): These needs have been identified, in comparison with other areas, by respondents as a lower level of importance and that needs are being addressed at a higher level. Recreational Services and Disaster Services fell into this category. Although this section is not a high priority for any specific type of change, there may be opportunities that exist if there is a disproportionately high level of attention given to these areas in relation to their importance.

Paired Sample T-Tests

Using the survey data, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the means of “Level of Importance?” and “How well served?” in order demonstrate the hypothesis that there is statistically significant evidence that the mean difference between these two responses is significantly different from each other. A statistically significant difference between the two responses could be implied to suggest a perceived disconnect between the level of importance of a needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

For each needs area, a hypothesis can be stated, as follows:

$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$ ("the paired sample means are equal")

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ ("the paired sample means are not equal")

For this hypothesis, μ_1 is the sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and μ_2 is the sample population mean of “How well served?”.

Child and Family Services

Considering the SPSS output for Child and Family Services (Table 17), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are not correlated ($r = 0.012$, $p > 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{634} = 26.533$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was 1.304 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [1.207, 1.400])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Child and Family Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 15

Child and Family Services

Paired sample statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.39	635	.954	.038
How well is it being served?	3.09	635	.801	.032

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	635	.012	.754

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences						T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Level of Importance & How well served	1.304	1.238	.049	1.207	1.400	26.533	634	.000	

Elderly Support Services

By examining the output for Elderly Support Services (Table 18), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are correlated ($r = 0.137$, $p < 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{621} = 20.761$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was .992 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [.898, 1.086])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Elderly Support Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 16**Elderly Support Services***Paired sample statistics*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.19	621	.982	.039
How well is it being served?	3.20	621	.820	.033

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	621	.137	.001

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	.992	1.191	.048	.898	1.086	20.761	620	.000

Health-Related Service

In consideration of the output for Health-Related Service (Table 19), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are not correlated ($r = 0.025$, $p > 0.05$). There was a statistically significant

difference between the sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{618} = 22.816$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was 1.178 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [1.077, 1.279]).

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Health-Related Service are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 17**Health-Related Service***Paired sample statistics*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.29	618	.913	.037
How well is it being served?	3.11	618	.926	.037

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	618	.025	.530

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	1.178	1.283	.052	1.077	1.279	22.816	617	.000

Mental Health-Related Services

Considering the SPSS output for Mental Health-Related Services (Table 20), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are not correlated ($r = 0.61$, $p > 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{613} = 25.999$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was 1.494 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [1.381, 1.607])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Mental Health-Related Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 18

Mental Health-Related Services

Paired sample statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.25	613	1.040	.042
How well is it being served?	2.76	613	1.038	.042

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	613	.061	.130

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	1.494	1.423	.057	1.381	1.607	25.999	612	.000

Physical Disability Services

Considering the SPSS output for Physical Disability Services (Table 21), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are not correlated ($r = 0.036$, $p > 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{596} = 17.123$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was .940 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [.832, 1.047])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Physical Disability Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 19

Physical Disability Services

Paired sample statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.13	596	.950	.039
How well is it being served?	3.19	596	.9111	.037

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	596	-.036	.379

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	.940	1.340	.055	.832	1.047	17.123	595	.000

Recreation Services

Considering the SPSS output for Recreation Services (Table 22), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are weakly and negatively correlated ($r = -0.100$, $p < 0.05$). There was not a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{603} = -1.836$, $p > 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was .128 lower than “How well served?” (95% CI [-.264, .009])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p > 0.05$, do not reject the null hypothesis.

$H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Recreation Services are equal. There is not a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 20**Recreation Services***Paired sample statistics*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	3.47	603	1.137	.046
How well is it being served?	3.60	603	1.165	.047

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	603	-.100	.014

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	-.128	1.708	.070	-.264	.009	-1.836	602	.067

Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services

Considering the SPSS output for Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services (Table 23), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are not correlated ($r = 0.001$, $p > 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean

of “How well served?” ($t_{599} = 19.662$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was 1.262 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [1.136, 1.388])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 21

Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services

Paired sample statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.11	599	1.125	.046
How well is it being served?	2.85	599	1.098	.045

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	599	.001	.973

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	1.262	1.571	.064	1.136	1.388	19.662	598	.000

Disaster Services

Considering the SPSS output for Disaster Services (Table 24), the following conclusions can be made:

The sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population mean of “How well served?” are correlated ($r = 0.318$, $p < 0.05$). There was a statistically significant difference sample population mean of “Level of Importance?” and the sample population's mean of “How well served?” ($t_{573} = 10.758$, $p < 0.05$). On average, respondents stated that “Level of Importance?” was .550 higher than “How well served?” (95% CI [.449, .650])

For the Paired Samples Test, $p < 0.05$, reject the null hypothesis, and accept the alternative hypothesis:

$H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$: The paired sample means for Disaster Services are not equal. There is a significant disconnect between the perceived level of importance of the needs area and the amount of resources being allocated to this area.

Table 22**Disaster Services***Paired sample statistics*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
What is the level of importance?	4.11	599	1.125	.046
How well is it being served?	2.85	599	1.098	.045

Pair Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Significance
Level of Importance & How well served	599	.001	.973

Paired Sample Test

	Paired Differences							
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Level of Importance & How well served	.550	1.223	.051	.449	.650	10.758	572	.000

Qualitative Analysis of Focus Group Data

The focus groups consisted of one live group and two online groups in which participants were given the same series of questions. The live session took place in the Meadville Public Library at a time that was agreed upon by all participants. The online focus groups were given 30 days to respond to the questions and reply to any feedback that they had received from group members. The online format provided more flexibility for those who could not commit to a specific time due to other obligations. The groups consisted of individuals who had previous experience with nonprofit organizations either as a volunteer or a full-time staff member. As

part of the initial introduction, it is explained to the participants that not all of the questions apply to everyone in the focus group. In each of the groups, the same questions were presented, allowing the participants to discuss their answers. The live group was recorded with a digital audio recorder and notes were taken throughout the session, which lasted for approximately one hour. The audio transcription was used in the transcription of some dialog that was difficult to notate during the session. For each of the questions that were discussed during the focus group session, there was a strong focus on the major themes and ideas that have emerged as the discussion continued.

Due to the amount of data from the focus group sessions, the speech was coded into different categories in order to determine if patterns exist in the data. The coding involved the recognition of categories codes throughout the responses and applying labels that were utilized to sort the data. The coding was used to combine or separate different types of categorical data. Before any questions were asked, the data from the survey was presented to the live focus groups, showing the results of the perceptual map and the existence of needs gaps that exist in certain areas. The following set of questions was asked to each of the focus groups, allowing for any needed time or clarification.

- What types of data regarding the community would be useful to your organization?
- Regarding the information provided to you regarding the survey responses for the local area, do you find this type of information useful to your organization? Were any of the results surprising?
- What's your most successful program and why? Give me your best example of the way you've seen your organization's work make a difference?
- What are the areas of opportunity for your organization? What could you do better?
- Do you have a strategic plan? What key things are you trying to accomplish in that plan?
- Is there anything that you wish more people knew about your organization or the issues you are trying to solve?

- Where does most of your funding come from? What percentage of your budget comes from private donations, and what do private donations help you to do that your other sources of funding don't cover?
- What are your most urgent needs?
- What would make the greatest difference in helping your organization get better at what it does?
- What are the steps you are taking to achieve your strategic goal?
- How do you measure and report on the effectiveness of your programs?
- What are the main obstacles that stand between you and your mission, and how do you plan to overcome them?
- What do you think are the most important needs in the community and how well are those needs being served?
- Do you think that some social needs or issues have been getting too much time and attention? If so, what are they?

In order to quickly record information during the focus group, a matrix illustrated below was used with relevant coding in addition to notes on the content:

Focus Group Question	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						

Original coding used for notation:

OR = Provided a response to the original question

A = Showed agreement

D = Showed disagreement

SE = Provides noteworthy statement or example suggesting an agreement

SD = Provides noteworthy statement or example suggesting disagreement

NR = Did not show agreement or disagreement

The focus group participants were also coded in order to provide a consistent level of anonymity and to make the identifiers of individuals consistent across all of the focus groups. Participants are identified with a four-character code in which each participant is provided a number within the focus group and another number that identifies which group of which they attended. For example, content identified by “PIG1” was provided by participant one in group one. The following provides the focus group responses separated by a question. Transcripts and online focus group content were cleaned in order to eliminate side conversations, simple acknowledgments, and remarks not related to the focus group topics. Having cleaned the data, the following represents the most relevant responses to each of the questions.

What types of data regarding the community would be useful to your organization?

P3G1: Recipient feedback on services provided would be good

P2G1: I could use more information on our program effectiveness. Often, we are left in the dark regarding the results.

P5G1: Feedback would be nice. It often feels like we do a lot of work and we can't see a result

P4G1: I'd like to see what this area really needs and find better ways to help them.

P2G2: We could use information regarding how we spend money. Too much is spent on overhead and administration

P4G2: I would like to hear more from the community and be able to see what people really think

P3G2: Positive feedback would be nice. I've sure people know how hard some of us work and we're volunteering

P1G3: I'd like to see how many people use our trails. It's hard to justify some of our expenses without information

P5G3: Yeah, I think the more we can show to our donors, the more they would be willing to help

P3G3: We could use feedback from the community on how we can improve

Regarding the information provided to you regarding the survey responses for the local area, do you find this type of information useful to your organization? Were any of the results surprising?

P4G1: I've never seen this kind of thing before, but it's interesting to see how people view issues

P2G1: It doesn't really surprise me; I think all of these areas need some attention though

P5G1: Everyone has their own priorities; mine could be different than yours

P2G2: I think it great. There isn't a lot of support for nonprofits, so your efforts are appreciated

P3G2: A: Anything that helps groups like ours is welcomed

P1G2: I'm surprised to see those differences exist

P5G3: I think it's important for folks to look at these things. It's hard to know where you're going without some perspective

P4G3: I don't think I was surprised by anything; I think more information is a good thing for everyone

What's your most successful program and why? Give me your best example of the way you've seen your organization's work make a difference?

P3G1: Our case management program does a great job at providing the services necessary to help families achieve their three main goals: obtain a full-time job, save 90% of income, and obtain sustainable housing.

P1G1: It is too lengthy to share a specific example, but the highlight is the coordination and facilitation of services needed.

P5G1: The multicultural program at the university was probably the best experience, raising awareness about cultures

P2G1: Helping people in the community; we raised money for the homeless

P3G2: Raising money for a cancer patient

P5G2: We recently prepared meals for numerous area shelters. The people were very grateful.

P1G3: Our bingo night has been very successful and popular; we have raised a lot of money for seniors

P4G3: I think of 50/50 raffles generally do pretty well. The public seems to relate to it

P2G3: Probably our annual 5k; we have a great turn out and it connects us to the community

What are the areas of opportunity for your organization? What could you do better?

P2G1: We need a full-time case manager. I would like to have the extra time to create a structured case management program after families find sustainable housing.

P1G1: Employees thinking more about themselves than who they help

P4G1: Better communication between leadership and volunteers. Some of the volunteers do not get the recognition that they deserve.

P3G2: Too much focus on administration rather than our people

P1G2: We have some disorganized leaders that make things harder than need be

P5G2: Differences between people tend to be a problem; I think some of the volunteers feel that they are taken for granted, so they leave

P2G2: Our funding is always a major concern; spending more time in the planning process would be useful

P4G2: I don't know if we connect with the community at times; it seems that we commit time to project that make people feel good rather than make a difference

P2G3: Yes. Alleviate family homelessness.

P4G3: To create a welcoming attitude in the community, education regarding different cultures

P1G3: We have a lot of challenges; overall, we are working to reduce poverty in our region by changing community conditions and creating opportunities for a better life for everyone.

Is there anything that you wish more people knew about your organization or the issues you are trying to solve?

P3G1: I think awareness of the multitude of factors contributing to homelessness.

P2G1: That more people were willing to learn and be more open minded; there is a lot of stigma attached to substance abuse

P5G1: The scope of our organization and how many people are affected by poverty in our area

P3G2: I think more awareness of our programs would help; many people do not understand the needs that we serve

P2G2: I think most people are aware; I'm not sure if they are interested

P5G2: I think that people should know that advocacy assistance is available to those who need it

P3G3: In a small town, volunteers are always needed

Where does most of your funding come from? What percentage of your budget comes from private donations, and what do private donations help you to do that your other sources of funding don't cover?

P2G1: Private donors, mostly I would say more than 70%. They provide unrestricted funds which allow us to meet all family needs.

P5G1: I great deal of it comes from private donors, but we do have corporate sponsors, as well.

P3G1: Mostly private donors, I'm not sure of the exact amounts

P4G2: I know that we have some companies that sponsor us, but I'm not sure

P1G2: Fundraising for the most part; we have a few different events that have been very successful

P3G2: We have a mix of public and private funding; I'm not sure of all the details

P2G3: Fundraising events would probably be the majority of it; I know they have worked with some local companies in the last

P1G3: Private donors make the biggest contribution from what I've seen

What are your most urgent needs?

P5G1: Probably affordable housing, transportation, employment opportunities

P2G1: Education of the community regarding homelessness and how they can help

P3G1: Increased volunteer participation

P1G2: More consistent funding; most of our activities are seasonal so it takes time for us to be prepared

P5G2: Our crisis center needs more funding to stay open

P3G2: More hours, for sure

P4G3: Better communication with the public

P1G3: Better funding and fund-raising activities

P5G3: I think that there needs to be better communication between our home office and our sites; many of us feel left out in the dark

What are the steps you are taking to achieve your strategic goal?

P3G1: I'm taking classes to better understand my job and hopefully advance

P1G1: I think a lot of our people spend a lot of time planning; not sure how specific I can be

P5G1: Community assessments are useful to us; we get a lot of feedback from community members

P2G2: We do an assessment on the program that are provided to supervisors

P1G2: Participant surveys are used occasionally

P4G2: Most of our projects have phases and goals for each phase to keep us on track

P2G3: I'm really not sure that we do, honestly

P4G3: I know that they do continuous assessment of our programs and we get to provide some feedback

P1G3: Some of our leaders seem to be handling this issue, but I'm not sure of the details

What do you think are the most important needs in the community and how well are those needs being served?

P3G1: I think poverty is one of the biggest issues that needs to be addressed; a lot of people want to ignore

P4G1: Drug control, there is a heroin epidemic; they have law enforcement but no local treatment centers that I know of

P1G1: No resources for young people; the area does not have much to offer

P2G1: Housing for low income and the elderly

P5G1: Advocacy specific to the elderly and domestic violence

P2G2: Major issues with drugs

P5G2: I think a lot of people are having a hard time just getting basic necessities in this area

P1G2: I'm not saying the most important, but events for the cure. Some of that gets more focus than issues like homelessness or our drug problem

P3G2: I don't think that there is one area that's more important than others, but drug issues could be addressed better

P4G2: Probably, I know a lot of charities are trying to raise money for food kitchens; it can be difficult in a small community

P5G3: Taking this survey has really opened my eyes to the fact that the small community I live in lacks in community support.

P2G3: There is no real transportation system for the elderly, or anyone for that matter.

P3G3: There are a couple of parks, but they are not always well kept or maintained, although I must say it's still nice to have them.

P1G3: Drugs are a huge issue in this part of Pennsylvania as well, but there are rarely any outreach programs, if any, offered in our community.

P4G3: Having these core community outreach programs that you have instituted into this survey, would be beneficial and help with the growth and prosperity of the community greatly, however; it is all too often heard that there is no money to support such programs. This has become the downfall of our little communities, in my opinion, and so many young people can't wait to get away from these little towns because there is simply nothing here for them to stay for, or to help them to grow and prosper as successful adults

Focus Group Completion

The qualitative data from the focus group presents the views of individuals that work in nonprofit organizations and allows for the comparison of this data to the quantitative data that was collected through the community needs assessment. Many of the focus group participants discussed the issues of poverty and homelessness which were not specifically addressed in the survey data. These issues can be viewed as being symptomatic of several of the identified needs areas, such as mental health, child and family, and drug/alcohol-related services. The focus group participants also highlighted the need for increased funding and volunteer participation as areas for improvement within their own organization. These can be viewed as potential solutions to the gaps in service that were identified in the quantitative data. The use of this mixed-methods approach allows for the identification of underserved areas of social need while also providing insights regarding potential underlying causes and possible solutions. The perspectives of focus group participants are beneficial in presenting the challenges and opportunities that are faced by those responsible for addressing areas of community need. Moving beyond the process of problem identification, these perspectives provide insight regarding how individuals perceive these challenges as a part of their nonprofit involvement.

This research activity concluded with the opportunity for the participants to ask questions and to speak freely regarding any issue of their choosing. Each of the participants was thanked personally or via e-mail for their contribution. Immediately after the conclusion of the session, data was organized in order to preserve meaningful information. In addition to this, notes were taken to capture, from a research perspective, what was done well and what could be performed better during other focus group opportunities. Both of these issues are discussed fully in the findings and recommendations section of this research.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Limitations of the study

The research conducted revealed several areas of improvement that could be made for future studies. The testing of the online survey on several different platforms would have eliminated some confusion for participants who attempted to complete the survey on a mobile phone or tablet. Several of the first participants contacted me regarding the manner in which the survey was being displayed on these devices. Some respondents stated that their device cut off sections of text, allowing for only part of each question to be viewable. In addition to this, several individuals stated that the phrasing of the questions was confusing or too complex. This resulted in some questions being omitted by the participant. Future research in this area would benefit from the integration of a cell phone application that allows participants to easily complete the survey on a device of their choosing without being limited to a website that is optimized for personal computer use.

Although the best efforts were made to distribute the survey in a manner that would receive responses consistent with the population, the demographics of the sample population appear to be representatively younger and predominantly female. This may have resulted from the use of email lists that were acquired from local universities and colleges. Although these institutions were represented only a small percentage of the organizations and businesses in which the survey was promoted, the response rates for university students was significantly higher than other groups. Additionally, the online format may have limited input from groups that do not have adequate knowledge or access to the internet. This can be addressed by the inclusion of traditional paper surveys that would be more appealing to those that have limited technological skills.

Focus group questions may have been more complex than would have been appropriate for this type of format addressing the general population. Although the questions made sense in terms of their general construction, when read aloud, the structure may have been too complicated for some participants, resulting in answers that did not completely match the question or a lack of response. In addition to this, participants who chose to answer first had the ability to shape the meaning of the question for those who had not yet responded. If the first person misunderstands a question or if they answer only part of the question, that response provides an indicator of how the next participant should answer. This could be avoided by providing a control that randomizes who responds first and provides an additional opportunity for everyone to provide feedback.

Findings and recommendations for leaders

Of the 714 individuals that chose to complete the online survey, 65.7% of the respondents (469) stated that they had current or previous experience working with community organizations, qualifying them to be able to answer the additional questions regarding the organization with which they worked. Of the qualified group, only 100 chose to take this extra step in the survey. When the participants were asked on a scale of 1 to 5 how much they agreed with the statement “My organization addresses important needs in the community”, an overwhelming 77% stated that they strongly agree (5) and the average for all responses was 4.65. However, when asked how much they agree with the statement “My organization addresses community need effectively”, there were no participants who selected that they strongly agree and the average for all responses was 3.22. This indicates a clear difference between how individuals view the work that they are performing and the manner in which that work is being performed. Since

organizational leaders are ultimately responsible for organizational effectiveness, this is a clear indicator that many individuals involved with community organizations believe that management could be improved.

From an examination of the quantitative data, a needs gap can be observed for each of the categories. A positive difference allows for the recognition of unmet or underserved areas of need within the community. “Health-Related Service” and “Child and Family Services” produced the largest gaps, with 1.38 and 1.19, respectively. Leaders in the community may want to consider the way in which additional resources could be allocated in order to better meet the needs of people in these areas. This may require a more detailed investigation regarding why this perception exists in this area and how to best address the concerns of local residents. This positive difference exists in all areas of need except for one, “Recreation Services”, which resulted in a negative difference between the two survey variables, -.12. This negative difference indicates that resources are being allocated to an area that is not viewed as comparatively important to the community. This is an indicator that individuals through the region view recreation as being overvalued in comparison with other areas of need. Leaders within the community may want to re-evaluate how resources are being allocated to this area in order to uncover why this area is viewed in this manner.

The implementation of the perceptual map shows two quadrants that should be areas of concern for leaders in nonprofit administration. From the previously discussed illustration, these two sections are “Section A” and “Section D”. Needs areas that fall under “Section A” are recognized for their importance, but in comparison to other needs areas, they are not perceived as being addressed in the most appropriate manner by the survey respondents. The areas that fall under this category are Mental Health-Related Services and Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services.

These areas should be critical areas for the nonprofit leaders and the community to examine how resources could be utilized in a manner that would better address these areas. The “Section D” needs areas have been identified, in comparison with other areas, by respondents as being at a lower level of importance and that is being addressed at a higher level. Recreational Services and Disaster Services fell into this category. Although this section is not a high priority for any specific type of change, there may be opportunities that exist if there is a disproportionately high level of attention given to these areas in relation to their importance. Nonprofit leaders may want to examine why respondents perceive these areas as being addressed at a higher level than their level of importance should warrant.

The paired samples for each category support the information obtained from the perceptual map. The categories of Mental Health-Related Services and Drugs/Alcohol-Related Services show a lack of correlation, statistically significant differences in means, and large differences between the perceived level of importance and how well the category was addressed. For Recreation Services, there was not a statistically significant difference in the means, and the means were weakly and negatively correlated. Although the paired samples support the same conclusions drawn from the perceptual map, it provides a unique comparison of means for each category independently, without a comparison made between the means of different categories. The similar nature of the results of perceptual mapping and paired means further strengthens the conclusions that can be drawn from both of these methods.

From the examination of the focus group data, several key findings can be highlighted. Individuals involved in community organizations expressed a strong desire for feedback from the community and from administrators regarding their work. This feedback can be viewed both as the desire for improved communication and information, but also, as the desire for recognition

and appreciation. This type of communication has been directly linked to the ability of nonprofit organizations to successfully retain volunteers. By providing an atmosphere that is positive and rewarding, the volunteer is more likely to perceive the organization and their role in a more positive manner. This can benefit the nonprofit through the improvement of the number of hours that volunteers are willing to work, the level of commitment and productivity of these individuals have for the organization, improved perception of the organization in the community, and improved performance during fundraising activities (Hobson, 1997).

When asked about the successes and opportunities that existed within their organization, focus group participants made numerous references to fundraising activities as both a positive and negative. This theme implies both the importance and the vulnerability that these organizations encounter regarding a consistent source of funds. This idea is supported by the number of focus group participants who were unable to identify the sources of their organization's funding. A similar theme is expressed with regard to volunteer availability. The lack of consistent resources creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability. When asked for specific areas of improvement that could be made within the organization, the quality of the leadership was referred to on several occasions. Based on these statements, it appears that members of leadership could be more communicative with volunteers and staff members and provide more consistent access to necessary resources.

The importance of communication between community members, nonprofit workers, and members of community leadership has been a consistent theme in this research. The quantitative and qualitative methods used in this research have uncovered the unmet needs of the region based on the perceptions of the sample population. The perceptions of individuals engaged in community organizations indicate a disconnect between the mission of the organizations and the

methods utilized to achieve their goals. Enhanced communication of both data and opinions between all stakeholders can provide better clarity regarding the needs of the community and how these needs can be met in the most effective manner.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Wayne Hall
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

TO: Jason Brady & Amanda Olejarski

FROM: Nicole M. Cattano, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)

DATE: 7/22/2020

Protocol ID #
20160509-1

Project: An Analysis of needs assessment methodology in northwestern Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations - *Continuing Review/Transition to Updated Common Rule*
Date of Approval: 7/22/2020

Expedited Approval

This protocol has been approved for a continuing review, and has successfully transitioned to the new updated 45 CFR 46 common rule that went in to effect January 21, 2019. As a result, this project will not require continuing review. It is currently approved for data analyses only and closed to any new participant enrollment. Any revisions to this protocol that are needed will require approval by the WCU IRB. Upon completion of the project, you are expected to submit appropriate closure documentation. Please see www.wcupa.edu/research/irb.aspx for more information.

Any adverse reaction by a research subject is to be reported immediately through the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs via email at irb@wcupa.edu.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole M. Cattano".

Co-Chair of WCU IRB

WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix B

Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: An analysis of needs assessment methodology and funds allocation processes in northwestern Pennsylvania nonprofit organizations

Investigator: Jason Brady
 West Chester University of Pennsylvania
 Department of Public Administration
 Contact Person: Jason Brady
 Phone: 412-952-4179

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted through West Chester University of PA.

(Please initial or check) I understand _____

The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, the expected duration or frequency of your participation, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. If you decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You will be given a copy of this form to keep. Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

(Please initial or check) I understand _____

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project

The research aims to gather information regarding the needs of the community, how this need is assessed by community organizations, and how funds are allocated to support these needs.

2. Explanation of Procedures

After you read and understand this informed consent form, you can begin the survey. The survey will describe several areas of community need, asking you to identify its importance and how well that need is currently being served.

3. Identification of Any Experimental Medical Treatments or Procedures

No medical treatment or procedures will be used during this research.

4. Discomfort and Risks

There are no risks associated with your participation in this study and I do not anticipate that there will be any discomfort to participants.

5. Benefits

Your participation will allow for a better understanding of the needs of the community and how those needs are being assessed. The information can be used to better address these needs in the future.

6. Confidentiality

Your participation in this research will be kept completely confidential. I will not be collecting your name or any identifying information during this survey. The data for this survey will be stored in a secure area and only those directly involved in the research will have access to information. The information will be presented only in collective form, with no individual responses identified.

7. Explanation of compensation, if any.

No compensation will be offered for the completion of the survey. A report on the results and findings of the research will be available online or paper version, by request.

8. Name of person to contact in case of a research-related injury

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board through the ORSP, 610-436-3557. I have read this form and I understand it. I understand that if at any time I become uncomfortable with this project I am free to stop my participation. I understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and I believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature or chosen acknowledgement _____

Date _____