What is a Needs Assessment?

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Element 2.2 of the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education [ACCME] *Essentials* states, "The provider must use needs assessment data to plan CME activities." But, what are needs assessment data and where do you find them?

Needs assessment can be defined as any systematic approach to collecting and analyzing information about the learning needs of individuals in terms of what is and what should be. The rationale for asking potential learners about their educational needs comes from the early 20th century work of John Dewey, who suggested that curriculum development should be learner-centered rather than subject-centered. A needs assessment should reveal a gap – a discrepancy between an existing set of circumstances and a more desirable set of circumstances – and should be stated in terms of knowledge, skills or attitudes.

Why Conduct Needs Assessments?

In the commonly used education model, needs assessment data, which help curriculum designers to identify problems that educational activities might alleviate, are used to create learning objectives (see Figure 1). The design of the educational activity flows from the learning objectives. Evaluation data collected after the activity is completed is then used as a starting point for conducting needs assessments for the next activity. Thus, the results of needs assessments drive the educational design process.

Moore[1] described a systematic approach to needs assessments. First, identify an educational problem or opportunity in the environment. Working with others, decide on a response to the problem or opportunity and determine a data collection strategy. Then collect and analyze the date before documenting and implementing the findings. A properly conducted needs assessment will generally reveal both educational and non-educational needs. In a health care environment, a true educational need would be a gap between current performance levels and potential higher performance levels that could be improved by increased knowledge, skills or changes in attitudes. Examples of non-educational needs in a health care environment could include administrative problems with staffing, equipment, policy, allocation of financial incentives or cultural clashes.

Figure 1. Professional Educational Model.
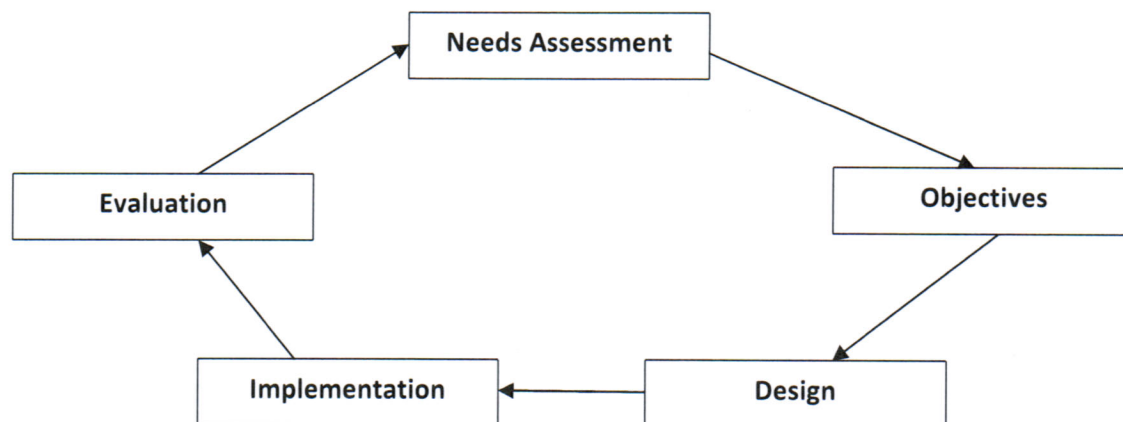
Sources and Methods of Needs Assessment

Before starting a needs assessment process, a CME professional must figure out:

1. What types of data would be most useful for describing the identified problem or opportunity.
2. Where the data could be obtained.
3. How the data could be collected.

Ideal data are accessible, accurate, reliable, relevant and cost-effective to obtain. The most common data sources are people and existing documents. For example, potential learners (the target audience), course directors, peers and specialist physicians, planning committee members, experts in a particular field, potential faculty, and patients and their families could all be sources of needs assessment data. Document sources include quality assurance reports, incident reports, community health data, Joint Commission of Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) reports, pharmacy and therapeutics committee minutes, mortality and morbidity conferences, physician performance data, literature reviews, medical library data and Internet data.

Methods for using data sources fall on a continuum that ranges from randomly collecting information based on subjective intuition, to developing a complex, systematic method of gathering objective data. A focus group in which a small number of potential learners are asked for their opinion would fall on one end of the continuum, while an objective analysis of new developments in diagnosis and treatment of a disease might fall on the other end. In between are methods such as telephone or personal interviews, independent questionnaires, activity evaluations, analyses of practice patterns or quality assurance data, formal, documented literature reviews, question cards, and audience response system polling. Successful needs assessments use existing data, which makes them cost-effective, and exemplary CME programs employ more than one data source in every needs assessment (unless only one source is needed to validate a need). No matter which methods of data collection are used, effective needs assessments serve as a motivational tool to involve potential learners and, thus, the results of needs assessments should be advertised to the target audience.

Linking Needs Assessment and Evaluation

If sources and methods of collecting needs assessment data are selected carefully, then the documented findings of needs assessments should drive the planning process from creating learning objectives to designing and implementing the activity. Needs assessment data will also provide criteria for establishing educational priorities by informing planners about the severity of an educational need, the potential for an educational activity to have an impact, and the receptivity of the target audience.

There should be a direct link between needs assessment and evaluation. If a specific educational need is identified, the degree of need reduction can be evaluated. If a target audience has been characterized, evaluation data can be sorted by learner category. If the results of needs assessments are organized and documented, proposed outcomes can be defined.

In summary, educational planning should always begin with a needs assessment derived from data collected from multiple sources, whenever necessary and possible. The results of the needs assessment should drive the educational planning process and should be directly linked to the resulting evaluation.

References

1. Moore DE. Needs assessment in the new health care environment: Combining discrepancy analysis and outcomes to create more effective CME. *JCEHP*. 1998:18; 133-141.
2. Green JS, Grosswald SJ, Suter E, Walthall DB, eds. *Continuing Education for Health Professionals*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass. 1984.
3. Moore DE, Green JS, Jay SJ, et al. Creating a new paradigm for CME: Seizing opportunities within the health care revolution. *JCEHP*. 1994: 14; 4-31.

Needs Assessment Pearls

When you conduct needs assessment:

- Involve learners in the process to make needs assessments a motivational tool
- Gather data systematically
- Use a combination of subjective and objective data
- Use existing data
- Use several data sources
- Advertise the results