How To | Needs Assessments

A **needs assessment, often referred to as a problem analysis, is a key step in strategic planning and is vital to developing effective prevention programs.**

A needs assessment can be a daunting task, and is often left out of prevention planning, though it is a vital step. Identification and understanding of the problems on campus and in the surrounding community will set the foundation of a strong strategic plan and inform all other decisions as a result. Without a clear identification of the problem, prevention efforts can be unsuitable for your campus, underdeveloped, and poorly executed. Undertaking a needs assessment involves 3 main steps: 1) gathering data on the nature and scope of the problem 2) identifying resources and assets in the campus community and 3) analyzing and condensing this information to clarify needs and opportunities.[1]

Nature and Scope of the Problem

A thorough understanding of the problems on campus and in the community leads to the development of effective strategies for prevention. Gathering information from multiple sources is the best way to gain comprehensive information. Consider using:

- MACHB data
- PIP Campus and Community Policy Survey
- Other student surveys
- Focus groups
- Field observations
- Campus and community archival data
- Arrest and incident report data
- Research literature

It is important to gain the "who, what, when, where, how and why" of issues on your campus from this step. Who is exhibiting high risk behavior? When and where is the most alcohol being consumed? How are underage students obtaining alcohol?, just to name a few. Individual and environmental factors should be identified as they both influence students' behaviors and perceived norms of others' behaviors. The College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide is a great tool to help with this step.

Available Resources and Assets in the Campus Community

The next phase of a needs assessment is identifying resources and assets that can be used to implement your strategic plan. Resources

and assets can include personnel, budget, time allocated to projects, and more. It may also be important to assess readiness to develop and implement a plan, especially if resources and assets are limited. Readiness can be assessed by examining support from administration, structure of the coalition, data collection and evaluation, reliance on evidence based approaches, etc.[1]

Another part of this step is collecting information on current initiatives, policies, and efforts to address alcohol and other drug issues on campus. Using a typology matrix (example shown below) can help categorize existing initiatives, identify gaps, and guide new efforts. Another resource, the College AIM, is a typology matrix that compares effectiveness of existing programs to cost for both individual and environmental-level strategies.

Needs and Opportunities

The final step of the needs assessment focuses on preparing and disseminating a report of the findings from the first two steps. It should be noted that your campus may identify more things to address

than is reasonable. Focus on a small number of interventions that will have the most meaningful impact. Remember that each intervention has a threshold for effectiveness, so your campus may implement a few strategies well, but if resources are spread too thin the impact may be lost.

A well-developed needs assessment shows the need for prevention efforts and creates a call to action for issues, while articulating current efforts and possibilities for growth. Sections of the report can include:

- Most prevalent and highest-risk behaviors among students
- Individual and environmental factors influencing behavior
- Identification of existing efforts, resources, and personnel
- Gaps in campus programs, policies, and enforcement and opportunities for improvement

Keeping the report problem focused with possible solutions and next steps will indicate that the issues identified are manageable and that progress

Strategic Intervention Matrix

	Individual	Group	Institution	Community	State/Federal
Alcohol-Free entertainment options	Club sports, student engagement	Student org events, philanthropy / service		Movies, concerts, museums, parks	
Normative Environment	BASICS, e-CHUG		Social norms campaigns		
Alcohol Availability		Greek Life training	Prohibit alcohol from stadiums	responsible beverage service training	
Marketing & Promotion			Marketing standards		Marketing to underage laws
Policy Development & Enforcement	New student orientation, student legal services		Biennial review, Residential Life policies		

can be made. Additionally, while gaps in campus programs and policies likely exist, be intentional about wording and avoid placing blame on any one entity.

Summary

Conducting a needs assessment can be time a time consuming process. Even a simple interpretation of the 3-steps, such as in the following example, can help in further strategic planning: 1) Use MACHB data to examine underage drinking levels and trends, 2) make a list of key players who can help with this issue such as residence life staff and local bars, 3) provide residence life staff and local bars with materials and training about the importance and benefits of combating underage drinking and how to promote accountability and enforce the legal drinking age of 21 among students. A needs assessment is a necessary step in strategic planning. Remember that this will be unique to your campus and that there is no "one size fits all approach" to prevention. These issues are complex and caused by multiple factors; no single initiative in isolation will be able to solve the problems. It is also necessary to revisit this step and assess your campus needs as you continue in the strategic planning process.

Resources

College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide
NIAA Alcohol Intervention Matrix (College AIM)

[1]DeJong, W. (2009). Problem Analysis: The First Step in Prevention Planning. The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention.

Ryan, B.E., Colthurst, & T., Segars, L. (2009). College alcohol risk assessment guide. The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention.

Toomey T.L, Lenk, K.m., Nelson, T.F., Larimer, M., Cronce, J.M., & Kilmer, J.R. (2015). Planning alcohol interventions using NIAAA's college AIM alcohol intervention matrix. National Institute of Health. Number 15-AA-8017