



# Montague – CTE Scholar Ranjita Misra (2004-2005) Department of Health and Kinesiology



## Community Needs and Strengths Assessment: Opportunities For Student Participation In The Classroom

The goal of this project was to incorporate community needs assessment research into the undergraduate classroom as an active learning project - one of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. With a growing emphasis on undergraduate research and skills development, this project will take the students through the process that health educators use to identify gaps between current programs and required programs and place those needs (gaps in results) in a priority order. Hence, Dr. Misra incorporated a “Community Needs Assessment” project into the Community Health course (HLTH 331) as a pilot project geared toward Health Education students. **The focus is on active learning, one of the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education** (Chickering, and Gamson, 1991), as it proposes to use hands-on skills development as part of their learning experience and coursework.

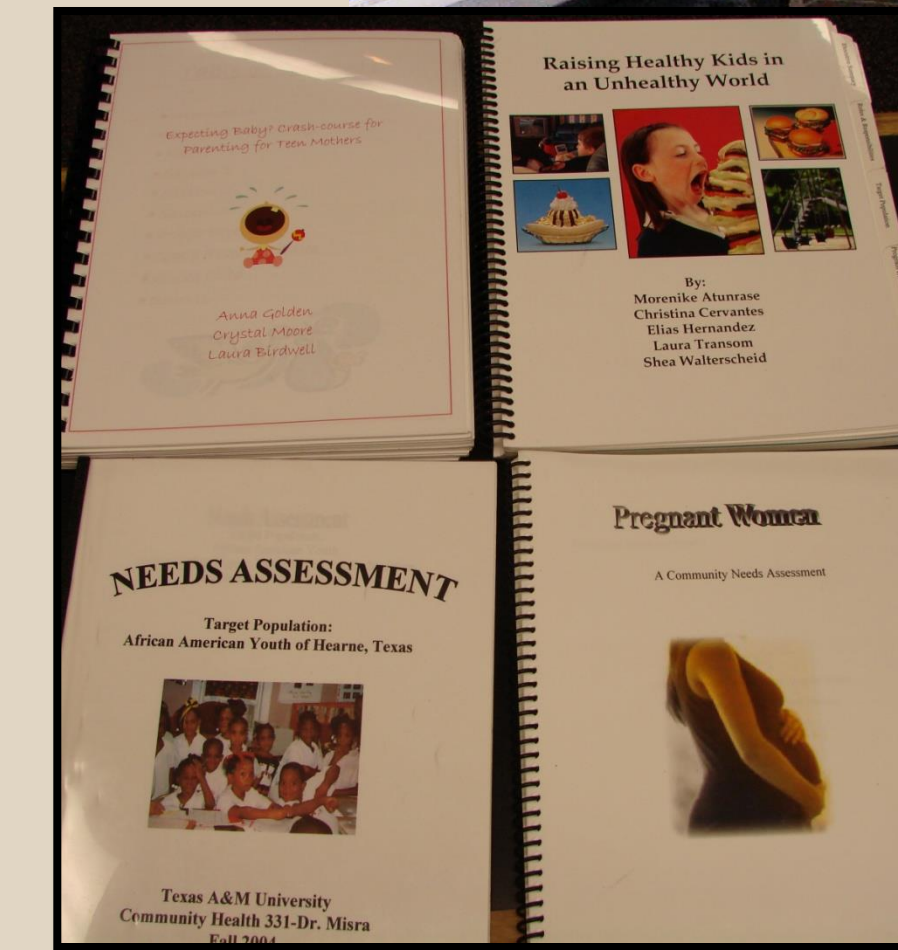


### Needs Assessment: What is It?

**Needs assessment** is the process of collecting and analyzing information to develop and understand the issues, resources, and constraints of the target population, as related to the development of health promotion programs (McKenzie, Pinger & Kotecki, 1998). In order to be successful, health educators must master the skills to do a community needs assessment and to identify problems, plan programs, gather the resources to carry out the plan, implement and evaluate to determine the success of the program.

### Six-step Approach to Project Implementation

- Groups - Students were divided into groups of three or four and assigned a specific target population (adolescents, elderly, pregnant women, Hispanic male, minority women, etc).
- Gathering data – Formal and informal community leaders (as identified by Dr. Misra) were invited to share their expertise for delineating the problem and questions to be asked for specific target audience. Survey instrument was developed, finalized and pilot tested before data collection. Students completed face-to-face interviews and reviewed health records and current literature for service needs and demands of their target population.
- Data analysis - Using statistical software, students analyzed health issues and needs of their target population.
- Prioritizing Needs – Was done based on (1) importance, (2) modifiable, and (3) resources available.
- Validation of the Need – Feedback from formal and informal leaders confirmed the validity of their needs.
- Project presentation – The students, as part of the project evaluation, presented the information to their peers and formal/informal leaders (who were invited to attend the presentation and give their feedback).



### Community Needs and Strengths Assessments as an Active Learning Project

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**ABSTRACT:** The Community Needs and Strengths Assessment Project (CNSAP) incorporated development of needs and strengths assessment research into an undergraduate Community Health course as an active learning project. The project was designed to provide students with hands-on experience in identifying and diagnosing health concerns, planning health programs, prioritizing effective public relations, and evaluating programs. Through the CNSAP students developed a process health educators use to identify gaps between current state of programs and required programs, gather the resources to carry out the plan, implement and evaluate to determine the success of the program. The project was completed in six steps: 1) assignment of students to groups, 2) assigning groups to a target population (adolescents, elderly, minority women, adults) for research, 3) developing a needs and strengths assessment instrument, 4) collecting, entering, and analyzing data, 5) identifying, prioritizing, and validating needs and strengths for each target population (from formal and informal community members), and 6) presenting needs and strengths assessment results in the classroom. Each group received supervision and direction throughout the project. Formal oral presentations created awareness of needs and strengths, and unique issues, for different target groups to every member of the class.

One of seven principles for effective practice in undergraduate education at colleges and universities seeks to encourage active learning. This project sought to enhance the undergraduate education experience, through hands-on skills development, as part of the student's learning experience in the classroom and in coursework. Needs and strengths assessments are useful to health educators primarily in identifying and diagnosing health concerns, planning health programs, prioritizing effective public relations, and evaluating programs. The Community Needs and Strengths Assessment Project (CNSAP) was incorporated as a pilot project for health education students in HLTH 331 - Community Health, an undergraduate course offered at Texas A&M University. Needs and strengths assessment is part of the course content, and objectives for the project include a subset of general objectives from the course syllabus (Figure 1).

With a growing emphasis on undergraduate research and skills development, the CNSAP leads students through a process used by health educators to identify gaps between current programs and required programs, then place those needs and strengths gaps in priority order. Successful completion of the project requires mastery of four skills: identifying data sources (primary data including survey, nominal group process, community forums, focus groups, and observation; and secondary data including government agencies, data from health records, and current literature); conducting primary data collection from a target audience; analyzing the data collected and setting priorities based on identified needs and strengths; and abstracting information concisely. The CNSAP helps students identify health needs to address in a community. Furthermore, needs and strengths assessment skills also prepare them for success in careers related to health services and health promotion.

**PROJECT RATIONALE**

Community health includes both private and public (government) efforts by individuals, groups, and organizations to protect, promote, and preserve the community's health. To deal with health issues that face communities, health professionals must possess specific knowledge and skills. They need to identify problems, develop a plan to address each problem, gather resources, implement the plan, then evaluate results to determine success of the program. To succeed in their careers, student majors in Health Education must learn to conduct a community needs and strengths assessment and to plan health promotion programs.

This project was completed in six steps: 1) assigning students to groups, 2) assigning groups to a target population (adolescents, elderly, minority women, adults) for research, 3) developing a needs and strengths assessment instrument, 4) collecting, entering, and analyzing data, 5) identifying, prioritizing, and validating needs and strengths for each target population (from formal and informal community members), and 6) presenting needs and strengths assessment results in the classroom. Each group received supervision and direction throughout the project. Formal oral presentations created awareness of needs and strengths, and unique issues, for different target groups to every member of the class.

1) Assignment to groups. Students were assigned randomly to groups (four to five members per group depending on class size) by the instructor.

2) Assignment of a target population. The instructor randomly assigned the groups to focus on a target population (adolescents, elderly, minority women, adults). Through group discussion, students narrowed the focus for their project. For example, one group chose to research college females, while another group chose to focus on African Americans as a minority population. Students received 15 minutes of class time to get acquainted with their group members and to identify their role in the project (researcher, data analyst, report writing, presenter). Each group received a "peer grade" evaluation form. Group members evaluated each other for involvement, time commitment in meeting project deadlines, attending meetings, timely completion of tasks, and grade assessment (self and other) group members) based on their involvement.

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### Meeting the Objectives of Center for Teaching Excellence

- ✓ The community needs assessment met one of the Centers for Teaching Excellence most important goals i.e., excellence in learning and scholarship to promote a superior undergraduate experience; Dr. Misra continues to implement this project in her Community Health course.
- ✓ This active learning project allowed the students an opportunity to conduct both primary and secondary data collection and familiarized them with gathering data from target audience, analyzing the data collected, prioritizing the identified needs, as well as abstracting information concisely.
- ✓ Provided a model to improve the student's understanding of community health problems.
- ✓ Students presented project results at the Student Research Week, Texas A&M University.
- ✓ Provided the opportunity to network with leaders in the field and professionals to find internships, jobs, or explore graduate schools.
- ✓ Allowed collaboration between departmental faculty (Dr. Misra and Dr. Ballard), presentation, and publication of this project in a high impact journal.



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