Prioritizing Educational Needs in Nye and Esmeralda Counties: Identifying Extension Program Opportunities

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The purpose of this comprehensive needs assessment was to identify issues and local needs that the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension might address through educational programs. This publication provides information about Nye and Esmeralda Counties citizens’ opinions on local issues.
Assessing Assets and Needs in Nye and Esmeralda Counties: Identifying Cooperative Extension Program Opportunities

Introduction

Nye and Esmeralda Counties are the focus of this assessment. These two counties are the programming area of University of Nevada Cooperative Extension located in Nye County communities of Tonopah and Pahrump.

Nye County is located in south central Nevada. It is 18,159 square miles and is the third-largest county in terms of area in the contiguous United States. (Census Bureau, 2012). The 2012 school enrollment figures list 5,398 students (grades K-12). As of 2012, the county’s population was estimated to be 45,766 (Kids Count, 2012), with Pahrump, the largest community in the county, reporting a population of 36,441. Tonopah, the county seat, has a population of 2,478. The median household income in 2011 was $39,740 as compared to $55,553 statewide and 20.5 percent of residents lived below the poverty level. Other communities within Nye County include: Amargosa, Beatty, Duckwater, Gabbs and Round Mountain. Nye County has a varied economic base which includes: natural resources (agriculture) and mining; government; leisure; hospitality and trade; transportation and utilities. Additional sectors influencing Nye County’s economy include health and education services and construction. Additional areas of interest in Nye County include the: Nevada Test and Training Range, Nevada National Security Site (formerly the Nevada Test Site), National Wild Horse Management Area, Railroad Valley Wildlife Management Area, a portion of Death Valley National Park, Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and approximately 6.6 million acres of federal lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. The county also contains portions of three Indian reservations of the federally recognized Duckwater, Yomba and Timbisha Shoshone tribes.
Esmeralda County is located in southwestern Nevada, west of Nye County and borders California. Esmeralda County is halfway between Reno and Las Vegas, and comprises 3,581 square miles with a population of 813. (Kids Count, 2012). The county seat is Goldfield with a population of 268. The median income in 2011 was $29,438 as compared to $55,553 statewide, and 21.5 percent of all residents lived below the poverty level.

(Census, 2012). Other communities within Esmeralda County include Dyer and Silver Peak. The population density is the second-lowest (after Loving County, Texas) of any county-equivalent outside of Alaska. The school district has no high school, and transports its students 142 miles roundtrip to Tonopah. There are three elementary schools, with Dyer Elementary School having the largest enrollment of 45 students. Esmeralda has been known historically for its boom/bust economy and thus has numerous ghost towns that include Blair, Coaldale, Hardluck, Lida, Gold Point and Palmetto. The county’s most famous landmark is the Goldfield Historic District. A very small part of Death Valley National Park lies in the southeastern corner of the county. Esmeralda County is dominated by the Silver Peak and Monte Cristo mountain ranges, and contains the highest natural point in Nevada, Boundary Peak, at 13,147 feet.

Needs Assessment

In spring of 2013, the Extension educator for Nye and Esmeralda Counties from the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension conducted a community situational needs assessment for the purpose of identifying specific educational and research priorities. The distinguishing characteristic of a community situational needs assessment is that it ties program development directly with stakeholder input. This is as opposed to, for example, tying programs to funding sources, academic appointments or service providers. (Singletary, et al. 2004).
Data Collection Methods

The primary method for this assessment involved collecting primary data from in-depth interviews with 17 county community leaders selected from the two counties. Interviewees included elected and/or appointed officials in Tonopah, Pahrump, Goldfield, Fish Lake Valley, Round Mountain and Lida. This qualitative approach to data collection was selected for a couple of reasons. First, since the Extension educator was new to the area, this interview approach provided a way to build relationships with community leaders. In addition, the interview format provided an opportunity to delve deeper into topics and gain a better understanding of each community leader’s unique perspective.

The purpose of gathering responses to open ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories. (Patton, 2002). Community leaders were selected because they have an expansive awareness of local and county needs as well as an understanding of the area’s assets.

The Extension educator developed an Interview Guide to include questions formulated around Cooperative Extension’s six program areas established through Nevada Revised Statute. Questions were drafted to include issues relating to county census data and then reviewed by several colleagues. Interview questions included numerous potential probes to help direct the interview to ensure that the most pertinent topics were covered.

The Interview Guide was intended to be a flexible tool and not all questions were posed verbatim. Two visual aids were included in the guide that displayed Cooperative Extension’s mission and values and a brief description of the six program areas: children, youth and families; agriculture; health and nutrition; community development; natural resources; and horticulture.

An introductory letter was sent to community leaders that introduced the Extension educator, described the assessment activity and provided
information regarding the purpose of the
interview. A total of 17 interviews were
scheduled, three of which were
conducted over the phone. The
remaining interviews were conducted
face to face at the office or work location
of the community leader. Only one
invitee was unable to participate due to
scheduling conflicts. Each interview
lasted about an hour.

All evaluation instruments and research
procedures were approved through the
University of Nevada Reno, Institutional
Review Board to ensure that correct
investigative protocols were maintained
throughout the entire process to protect
respondents’ confidentiality.

Assessment Results

Community Assets

Leaders were asked what they liked
best about their communities. Many
positive features or assets were shared,
including: cleanliness, clear skies,
incredible sunsets and sunrises; great
weather being conducive to being active
outside all year; a sense of freedom
regarding the wide open spaces and
enjoyment of solitude and quiet; great
diversity in the geography of the area
such as a wide variety of plants,
geology, and mountains; a quality of life
that includes the friendliness and quality
of people who care about each other;
relatively low crime; no traffic issues;
and the highly valued self-reliant way of
life in the West, along with a sense of
freedom from government regulations.

Figure 1 illustrates a creative tool known
as wordle to provide a visual diagram
using interviewees' comments about
perceived assets. In Esmeralda and
northern Nye County, leaders expressed
an undeniable appreciation for the
history of the counties’ smaller towns.
In southern Nye County, leaders noted
an appreciation for opportunities
presented by the area’s close proximity
to larger cities, such as Las Vegas, San
Diego, Los Angeles and Phoenix.

Figure 1: Perceived Assets of Nye
and Esmeralda Counties

Perceived Needs and Implications for
Educational Programs

Several themes regarding perceived
community needs emerged from the
interview results in the two counties.
These included community development
topics, such as the need to strengthen
and expand infrastructure, tourism
development, local management of
public lands and leadership. Perceived
needs also included growing sustainable
economies and creating a climate of
possibilities where new ideas can be
explored without resistance. Children,
youth and families topics included
creating a more positive environment in
which all students thrive and graduate with life skills and a career plan. Strong families were seen as the cornerstone for helping youth reach their full potential.

The themes identified included combining the program area of health and nutrition together with children, youth and families. Also, land-management issues are a high priority in regards to community development and are reflected in the program area of community development rather than natural resources or agriculture. Based on the frequency of topics and issues identified, Cooperative Extension program areas were categorized based on high, medium and low priorities. Table 1 illustrates these priorities by frequency of comment.

Table 1: Frequency of Comment on Issue or Topic Categorized by University of Nevada Cooperative Extension Program Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Program Area</th>
<th>Comment Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Priority:</td>
<td>Community Development</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children, Youth &amp; Families</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium Priority:</td>
<td>Horticulture</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Priority</td>
<td>Natural Resources</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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These priority program areas are broken down by specific topics and covered in more detail in the following sections.

**Community Development**

Community development is a high priority throughout Nye and Esmeralda Counties. In the Pahrump area, there is a need for basic infrastructure for business development, such as providing new roads and having access to utilities, sewer and water. Land-use management is a major issue and source of frustration for the entire county due to the fact of 98 percent of Nye County public lands are owned and managed by the federal government. This situation is perceived by many leaders to prohibit better land-management practices, the creation of tax districts and private use of public lands. (Board of Nye County Commissioners, 2012). In addition to land-use issues, leaders report that the process required to approve new businesses is extremely slow and cumbersome.

Attracting high-paying industrial jobs to the counties was often seen as the answer to the economic and social issues, due to many families needing to work several low-paying jobs to make ends meet. Creating a diversified economy that is sustainable beyond the boom/bust periods known historically in northern Nye and Esmeralda Counties would be a benefit to the area. Figure 2 illustrates the counties’ largest employers.
According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, the current unemployment rate in Nye County is 12.1 percent and 4.1 percent in Esmeralda County. Fourteen schools out of 20 in Nye County qualify for free and reduced priced lunches. (Nevada Schools Count Day Enrollment, 2012).

Based on this needs assessment, Extension programs that focus on community development are a high priority. Figure 3 illustrates the beneficial topics within community economic development that can be strengthened in the region, such as: leadership development, organizational capacity building and community planning.

In northern Nye County, interviewees shared that there is a volunteer crisis in their communities. There is a severe shortage of volunteers to carry out the important services of the community such as medical emergencies, fire and rescue, community annual events, and the summer farmers’ market. Some of the reasons given for the volunteer shortage include aging of current volunteers, an increase in volunteer requirements and lack of motivation for new volunteers to step forward. One example of building organizational capacity and leadership development could include engaging more youth and parents in the planning of community training; volunteer development; strategic planning; meeting facilitation to develop or expand a vision; issue identification; stakeholder and focus group interviews; and hospitality basics.
Including families in program planning is seen as a long-term benefit as youth who see their parents’ community involvement are more likely to become active in the community themselves. (Chan & Elder, 2001).

**Children, Youth and Families**

Children, youth and families issues are a high priority throughout Nye and Esmeralda Counties. All interviewees expressed that strong families were the foundation for positive youth development and instrumental if youth are to reach their greatest potential. Figure 4 illustrates the important issues within this program area.

**Figure 4: Children, Youth and Families Program Area**

The topics related to children, youth and families identified in the interviews include: strengthening families, teaching youth life skills, importance of health and nutrition, and career/ work force training.

Leaders expressed concerns that youth lack practical life skills, such as a strong work ethic, financial literacy, and communication skills. Additionally, they lack opportunities to explore career paths that could motivate them to complete their high school education. It is also important to teach positive relationship-building skills to high school students to enhance their career and parenting skills later in life. Programs that emphasize health and nutrition are important ways in which youth and adults can adopt a healthier lifestyle, as well as manage stress.

**Horticulture**

Horticulture programs remain an important program area in the two counties. Since the last economic downturn, there has been a shift in public interest that includes a greater desire for Nevada residents to grow their own food and to support local agriculture. (Kratsch & Skelly, 2012). Based on their assessment, Kratsch & Skelly recommend specific topics to emphasize, such as: home and small-scale food production; support of community and local school programs; pest diagnosis and management; climate-appropriate gardening and landscaping practices; and programs to support green-industry training.

The Master Gardener Program in Pahrump continues to be a viable
program in developing the capacity of local citizens in learning and continuing to be engaged in their community through meaningful projects. It would be a great benefit for every community in the two-county region to develop a cadre of Master Gardeners to teach others about home gardening, which is known to include additional benefits such as increasing self-reliance, health and well-being of participant; and creating a sense of community. In addition, residents who lack easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables could also benefit from community gardening projects. A recent study reported that Nye County came in last place in the state regarding three of seven health outcomes (mortality, morbidity and social economic factors) which corresponds to the overall health of the county. (University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, 2013). Increasing the health and well-being of children, youth and families through community gardens, and through health and nutrition education would help improve the health of the county’s population.

Natural Resources

Interviewees were asked to share what they thought the greatest natural resources are for their communities. Figure 5 provides a visual diagram that illustrates interviewees’ perceived natural resource assets. Some of the challenges regarding natural resources include working with the federal government to locally manage public land and address sage grouse habitat. In addition, water conservation, soil erosion due to high winds, drought issues and healthy rangelands are important concerns.

Figure 5: Interviewees’ Perceived Natural Resource Assets

Conclusion and Discussion

At the conclusion of the interviews, the interviewees were asked a “what if” question as another way to prioritize Extension program needs. That is, interviewees were asked what they as leaders would do if they had all the resources they needed and community support, and success was guaranteed. Figure 6 provides a visual diagram regarding answers to this question. In short, the desired outcome includes both counties thriving in the areas of

Pahrump Demonstration Garden
D. Woodland

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education, where every child would graduate and have the life skills to be successful. Economically, communities would include abundant opportunities to attract industry, renewable energy, entrepreneurs, film industry, and transportation to the area. Land issues would be resolved and locally managed, and include healthy ranges. Tourism development would include restoring buildings and hospitality training.

**Figure 6: Desired Outcome**

This assessment resulted in a greater understanding of the assets and needs facing Nye and Esmeralda Counties and its leaders. The Cooperative Extension educator will use the results of this assessment to establish educational program priorities for the next five years. Seventeen interviews were conducted with each of the interviewees sharing their perspectives and hopes for making a positive difference in their communities and county.

The results of this study provided data to determine the educational and research needs for the residents of Nye and Esmeralda Counties. The two program areas with the greatest need are community development; and children, youth and families.

An underlying theme interpreted through the author was the desire to create a climate of possibility thinking. (Burnard, P., et al. 2006). Many of the interviewees felt that a new way of thinking was needed that would create a space for possibility and fresh ideas. *Possibility thinking* is at the heart of creativity as people use their imaginations to find alternative possibilities to a problem or an issue.

The focus of *possibility thinking* is not on what was, but on what can be. With this type of mindset or thinking, along with visioning and strategic planning, leaders and citizens can create a powerful vision to include the necessary conditions to lead their economies and communities toward their highest potential. In addition, this climate of *possibility thinking* can be of great benefit to students and others as they explore their career potential beyond what they or others think is possible.
Strong, Vibrant Communities

Children, Youth & Families

Communuity Economic Development

Leadership Development

Community Planning

Organizational Development

One of the challenges to this qualitative research was the challenge in prioritizing one program area over another. For example, it is difficult to prioritize topics within community development higher than those within children, youth and families. Many community and societal issues don’t fit neatly in one particular program area, as the author sees the inter-relatedness among issues, and among program areas. Educational impacts measured in community and economic development program areas will likely positively impact children, youth and families. Likewise, strengthening families through youth and family programming, along with building assets and life skills through youth programs, such as 4-H, can influence the health and well-being of communities, as well as impact the local economy and workforce. Activities that confine themselves to work within only one program area, however successful and comprehensive, will be insufficient to build the kind of community where children, youth and families thrive socially and economically. (Bruner & Parachini, 1997). Youth do not grow up in programs, they grow up in communities. As Figure 7 illustrates, a comprehensive approach to strong, vibrant communities must include the following components: strengthening children, youth and families; developing leadership within youth and communities; building organizational capacity; community planning, and community and economic development.

**Figure 7: Comprehensive Approach to Community Development**

In recent decades, the field of community development has evolved beyond single-issue, project-based strategies that address a narrow range of community needs to a more comprehensive approach. In conclusion, comprehensive community development offers more of a holistic approach that uses deep and abiding citizen engagement to address a spectrum of interconnected needs. Residents and leaders envision a better future; create a definitive plan to accomplish that vision;
and recruit local agencies, organizations and institutions into a collaborative partnership that integrates programs and services to improve the quality of life within the community (LISC Institute 2013). The next step based on this assessment includes providing educational programs to strengthen families, which will include health and nutrition programs, building organizational capacity and leadership development.

References


