Needs Assessment: Trends and a View Toward the Future
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James W. Altschuld
Ryan Watkins
Editors
Editorial Policy and Procedures

New Directions for Evaluation, a quarterly sourcebook, is an official publication of the American Evaluation Association. The journal publishes works on all aspects of evaluation, with an emphasis on presenting timely and thoughtful reflections on leading-edge issues of evaluation theory, practice, methods, the profession, and the organizational, cultural, and societal context within which evaluation occurs. Each issue of the journal is devoted to a single topic, with contributions solicited, organized, reviewed, and edited by one or more guest editors.

The editor-in-chief is seeking proposals for journal issues from around the globe about topics new to the journal (although topics discussed in the past can be revisited). A diversity of perspectives and creative bridges between evaluation and other disciplines, as well as chapters reporting original empirical research on evaluation, are encouraged. A wide range of topics and substantive domains is appropriate for publication, including evaluative endeavors other than program evaluation; however, the proposed topic must be of interest to a broad evaluation audience. For examples of the types of topics that have been successfully proposed, go to http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-155510.html.

Journal issues may take any of several forms. Typically they are presented as a series of related chapters, but they might also be presented as a debate; an account, with critique and commentary, of an exemplary evaluation; a feature-length article followed by brief critical commentaries; or perhaps another form proposed by guest editors.

Submitted proposals must follow the format found via the Association’s website at http://www.eval.org/Publications/NDE.asp. Proposals are sent to members of the journal’s Editorial Advisory Board and to relevant substantive experts for single-blind peer review. The process may result in acceptance, a recommendation to revise and resubmit, or rejection. The journal does not consider or publish unsolicited single manuscripts.

Before submitting proposals, all parties are asked to contact the editor-in-chief, who is committed to working constructively with potential guest editors to help them develop acceptable proposals. For additional information about the journal, see the “Statement of the Editor-in-Chief” in the Spring 2013 issue (No. 137).

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This issue of *New Directions for Evaluation* is dedicated to the memory of John Wedman (1949–2013)—a dear friend, a valued and respected colleague.
Contents

Editors’ Notes
James W. Altschuld, Ryan Watkins

1. A Primer on Needs Assessment: More Than 40 Years of Research and Practice
James W. Altschuld, Ryan Watkins
This chapter provides an overview of needs assessment’s rich history, definitions, models, tools, and techniques that closely align its theory, research, and practice and its association with several other fields, notably strategic planning and evaluation.

Ryan Watkins, Jolanta Kavale
The nagging concern over numerous definitions of a “need” and how those definitions affect the assessment of needs are the focus of this chapter.

3. Needs Assessment: The Perspective From the Public Sector
Molly Engle, James W. Altschuld
While looking at needs is commonly done in many public-sector agencies, the authors question how it is done and if it focuses too narrowly on deficits or gaps and not incorporating assets.

4. Needs Assessments in the Private Sector
John Wedman
In this chapter, the author examines how needs assessments can identify solutions that will improve individual and group performance, as well as produce valued business results.

5. Needs Assessments to Determine Training Requirements
Traci Lepicki, Adrienne Boggs
This chapter describes needs assessment within the context of a specific workforce development project, offering the assessment process, phases, and levels, and the implications and lessons learned when considering training needs.

6. International Perspectives: Similarities and Differences Around the Globe
Maurya West Meiers, Ryan Watkins, Kristin Marsh Song
Needs assessments are occurring across the globe and these authors not only provide examples of such practice, but they also give useful guidelines for how to navigate the choppy waters of culture and tradition.
7. Needs Assessment and Asset/Capacity Building: A Promising Development in Practice
James W. Altschuld, Hsin-Ling (Sonya) Hung, Yi-Fang Lee
For a period of time, there have been sharp criticisms of the premise of needs (starting from deficits) as opposed to asset-based planning and a hybrid model of the two as a new approach to planning and development is explained.

8. A Final Note About Improving Needs Assessment Research and Practice
Ryan Watkins, James W. Altschuld
As the practice of needs assessment evolves, newer methods are appearing on the scene as well as the necessity for conducting practical, applied research on the conduct of assessment.

INDEX
Editors’ Notes

Have you ever wondered how (and why) two relatively normal friends would ever take on editing a special issue of a journal or a book together? Are you curious about how they come up with a theme and then find authors? To give you some insights, below is a recreation of a conversation that led up to this issue of New Directions for Evaluation. It may lead to questions about our sanity, but in the end hopefully it will reflect what a wonderful opportunity it is to work closely with colleagues and how the process can work for those who may be considering taking a similar journey in the future. At the same time, our “dramatized” conversation illustrates why we wanted the chapters that you now find in this issue and what we hope they will contribute to the professional field.

A conversation between Jim Altschuld (JA) and Ryan Watkins (RW) about an issue of New Directions for Evaluation on needs assessment (over lunch, at the 2012 AEA conference in Minneapolis):

Ryan, I think that we should do an issue of New Directions devoted to the current state of needs assessment and what is emergent in the field. I don’t think that there has been one on the topic before and a lot is going on now. The timing seems good to me and we ought to do it. As I have threatened many times before, I am retired and this might be my last AEA conference.

Question from RW:

Yeah, right Jim. We will be having lunch at the 2020 conference (in Honolulu if we are lucky). But I like the idea of a special issue. Can you tell me more about what are you thinking, what might be in the issue, what are some possible chapters, and why anyone would want to read it?

Reply by JA:

Lots of questions—pass the mustard—and let me take a shot at a couple of them. We both know that concepts about needs and ways to assess them are constantly evolving. In the last six-to-seven years, at least nine books (and maybe more) about needs assessment have been written. You, I, and others have all published numerous articles, and the Needs Assessment TIG at AEA has taken on new life. So maybe the issue could capitalize on these events. One chapter, the first one, would have to capture what has been taking place and should be an overview of the field with a time line showing its origins and how it has progressed and changed (Altschuld & Watkins, Chapter 1 of this issue).
Response from RW about what might be missing:

I like it. And it would be great to have something about theory or at least theory-oriented. To me this is a shortcoming in much of what we see in practice and in academic writings. It just so happens that I have been discussing this notion with a colleague (Jolanta Kavale) in Lithuania who has interest in the philosophy of “needs” and perhaps we could work up a chapter about basic definitions of need—one that would sort of ask us to relook at the basics and subtle nature of what we mean by need (Watkins & Kavale, Chapter 2 of this issue).

Comment by JA:

I don’t know, I was hoping to have higher standards in choosing authors. To me, then, we would want a dose of real-world perceptions. From my point of view, needs assessments are prominent in some aspects of government work, in organizational development, and for identifying needs for training in the public and private sectors. A close personal friend and an evaluator of note, Molly Engle, has that first emphasis in her work, so why don’t we invite her to write Chapter 3? If it is okay with her, I will join in for this chapter (Engle & Altschuld, Chapter 3 of this issue).

Going further, we know John Wedman’s Performance Pyramid and its application really fits in with our thinking. He would be great for a chapter about organizations and private sector assessments. Let’s ask him to write a chapter (Wedman, Chapter 4 of this issue). And then I am familiar with a unique training needs assessment that is currently underway in Ohio. (Go Bucks; you know I can’t resist saying that at least once every time we talk.) But seriously, the project utilizes several different methods to collect data. I would suggest that Traci Lepicki and Adrienne Boggs, who are conducting that endeavor, could contribute a chapter (Lepicki & Boggs, Chapter 5 of this volume).

RW jumps in:

This is beginning to sound like lots of work. You will do all the heavy lifting, right?

Actually it will be fun to get to know some of these people better. Like you, I read their articles and occasionally see them present, but I don’t know many of them all that well. And if we twist their arms a little maybe they will take over leading the TIG for us!

I think what we are talking about makes a lot of sense, but I perceive that we don’t have anything of an international nature. Assessments are commonly
done in settings outside the U.S., and we don’t want to paint ourselves as the middle of the needs assessment universe. As you know, I wrote a needs assessment book with friends at the World Bank; they have lots of international experience. Suppose we were to have a practical tips chapter for assessments outside the U.S., with examples coming from other countries. I could ask Maurya and another colleague at the Bank to take the lead on this (West Meiers, Watkins, & Marsh Song, Chapter 6 of this issue).

JA posits Chapter 7:

Along those lines, I have a new book (Sage Publishing) on the emergence of a hybrid model that combines asset/capacity building and needs assessment. I am working with Sonya and Yi-Fang to expand this concept and further develop this new approach. Suppose we build from this for a chapter. It would be cutting edge (Altschuld, Hung, & Lee, Chapter 7 of this issue).

RW comes back in:

I like the idea; let’s go with it. Also, we have had many conversations about the future of needs assessment and issues that should be addressed. Should that be the final chapter, focusing on trends in practice and how technology will enhance what the future holds? Also, how can we improve what is being done and make assessments more rigorous? This would be a good closing note. What do you think (Watkins & Altschuld, Chapter 8 of this issue)?

JA has almost the final word:

I do have a concern, though. Although we have been talking about a great list of authors, I worry that we could get a kind of show-and-tell feel to the volume. Some of that is necessary and would ordinarily occur, but it cannot be the whole shooting match. Some of the audience for the issue may have more of an academic bent; how can we walk the tightrope between these competing types of things?

RW close to the final word:

Okay, what would you think about this? First, you do all work, then I take all the credit.

Just kidding! We have both edited books before so we can work together to strike a good balance. We also don’t want it to be too academic; there is enough of that already out there. Second, let’s guide them by asking challenging questions that take them a bit out of their comfort zone. What’s your take?