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In 2018, former CCED Director Amy Whitehead helps citizens from communities across Hot Spring County document their unique perspectives, needs and plans for the future.

## Taking the pulse of the people: Developing a community survey

By Emily Cooper Yates

**T**he start of a new community initiative can feel monumental. Our team at the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) recommends the first step in any community-wide planning be the distribution of a community survey. Conducting a community survey engages citizens and provides direction. A successful survey captures feedback from a diverse population and provides a healthy sample of data. Reaching this goal involves teamwork, creative marketing and data analysis. After conducting surveys in several communities across the state, our team suggests you consider these steps when developing your survey.

### Develop a leadership team

Input from a diverse leadership team ensures the content and distribution of the survey encompasses your whole community. Involving voices from across your community will also assist in more accurate data collection.

The leadership team was a vital component when the city of Lonoke launched the Kick Start Lonoke Action Plan in 2016. Ryan Biles, co-chair of the Kick Start Lonoke Executive Committee, emphasized the importance of an inclusive steering committee. “When you successfully build a steering committee where diverse voices are heard, then you have a core group that will help you define the important questions and priorities of your work together moving forward,” Biles said.

The leadership team will help engage as many community members as possible. Every citizen’s interests are addressed when a spectrum of individuals is part of the planning process.

### Develop the content

A few factors influence the content of your survey. First, determine the survey’s geographic focus: city- or county-wide. The reach of the community survey depends on your community’s specific needs and the data you want to collect. This will be different for

every community depending on your goals for the survey. When CCED worked with Hot Spring County to conduct a community survey, the leadership team decided to focus their planning efforts county-wide.

County Judge Dennis Thornton explained why they made that decision. “Hot Spring County is made up of so many wonderful communities, and I wanted to give them the opportunity to express what their specific needs were, knowing that not all communities would share the same needs,” he said. “For example, Bismarck expressed a need for incorporation, while Malvern desired a civic center.”

After you define the geographic scope of your survey, consider the questions to pose to the community. Questions can be serious or lighthearted in tone, open-ended or multiple choice. They can be general or focus on a specific project.

Demographic information is essential, so consider including questions regarding race, gender, age, employment and geographic location. This data provides an even deeper understanding of your community, thus ensuring every citizen’s needs are addressed.

We suggest including questions where citizens can share their top community and economic development opportunities (education, job creation, health care, education, downtown development, tourism, etc.). We also suggest including an open-ended question that offers space for citizens to share their unique ideas and opinions.

One question our team likes to include in every survey is: “Which words describe the personality of your community?” Survey takers select from a list that includes adjectives such as “high tech,” “scenic” and “small town.” We find that this question offers a peek into how your citizens perceive your community and how they communicate about it to outsiders.

Finally, always include a call to action on the survey. Give citizens the opportunity for involvement in the new community initiative or planning process. At the end of the survey, develop an optional section to collect basic contact information to cultivate citizen interest. You can refer to these self-identified citizen volunteers when you begin your community work.

## Collect responses

Collecting responses for a community survey involves creative marketing ideas. The goal is to collect as many responses as possible, as well as to engage a variety of citizens. The survey should be visible and easily accessible to the public.

The city of Lonoke is a great example of clever survey marketing. In 2016, they included a paper copy of their community survey in the city’s water bills. They found this tactic to be so effective that water bills are now a major piece of communication in the implementation of the Lonoke 2022 Strategic Action Plan. “If we truly want participation, we have to employ an approach that is as diverse as our population,” Biles said.

Social media is also a popular medium of communication. Mat Faulkner of Think Idea Studio led the marketing for Searcy’s community survey in 2020. Faulkner suggests utilizing video for social media marketing. “The video format informs and engages better than text and stagnant graphics,” he shared. “So be excited, use people in videos that the community will recognize and have a lot of fun with it.”

We find that word of mouth is the most effective form of communication. Challenge your family, friends, coworkers and neighbors to spread the word about your community survey. Share the online survey link or paper copy at your local businesses, restaurants, schools, churches, nonprofit agencies and community events.

## Analyze the data

Completing your survey is only step one in a big process. At your survey’s conclusion, you are left with a gold mine of data. Find someone who can analyze that data effectively and identify trends. Use the information to make informed decisions to move forward in your planning process. Compile the data into a digestible format, like easy-to-read charts, to share back with your community.

A community survey can be a tool for widespread citizen engagement and can provide direction for new projects. By focusing on building an inclusive leadership team, quality content, inventive marketing techniques and in-depth data analysis, you will capture a rich sampling of perspectives.

If you need assistance in developing a community survey, you can email the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development at [cced@uca.edu](mailto:cced@uca.edu) or call 501-450-5269. 🏠



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