

Assessment of West Virginia Public Issues: Perceptions of Key Decisionmakers



West Virginia University Extension

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Using a survey design, WVU Extension assessed the level of importance of public issues from the lens of key decisionmakers in West Virginia. Decisionmakers rated the importance of **58 public issues** under five pillars. Below are the three most important issues under each pillar.

Education

- Improving career readiness among youth ages 14-18
- Increasing youth life skills (e.g., resume building)
- / Increasing the number of youths who enroll in apprenticeship programs after high school graduation

Prosperity

- / Increasing household and business access to broadband to promote economic and educational development
- Increasing the number of local jobs that pay a living wage
- / Creating, retaining and growing local businesses

Individual and Family Health

- / Decreasing youth high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and arrests
- Improving individuals' physical health (e.g., reducing blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, heart disease) and/or reducing chronic diseases
- Improving mental health and stress management for youths and adults

Community Health and Civic Engagement

- / Developing youth leadership skills
- Increasing a sense of pride, community belonging and connectedness
- Increasing youth participation in community service opportunities

Natural and Resource Management

- Increasing water quality and conservation
- / Improving community waste management (e.g., solid waste management, dumping, recycling, etc.)
- Preparing for natural disasters and variations in climate (e.g., flooding and storm damage, drought, extreme temperatures, etc.)

61% of respondents or someone in their family currently participate in WVU Extension programs. 57% indicated they were "very familiar" with WVU Extension.



Background

West Virginia University Extension delivers relevant, research-based educational programs to individuals and communities across the state. These educational programs address critical issues that affect society. In 2021, the WVU Extension Dean's Office initiated a study to gauge stakeholders' opinions on priority issues in their communities. While it was important to capture the opinions of all stakeholder groups in the state, we were more interested in understanding the issues that are important to state and local policymakers in West Virginia. The process began with a survey developed by the WVU Extension Office of Research and Evaluation in collaboration with WVUE's rural economic development specialist and administrative team. Survey findings will be used to develop WVU Extension program priorities as part of WVU's Strategic Transformation Plan. The Plan was put forth by the WVU Provost and WVU Board of Governors and will be used to chart the University's future, including how we meet the needs of West Virginians.



WVU Extension provides hands-on science, technology, math and engineering (STEM) programming to West Virginia youths to prepare them for 21st century jobs.



Each year, youths from all over the country participate in the Junior Firefighter Camp where they receive training to prepare them to be future firefighters.



3 Purpose

The purpose of this needs assessment was to gain insight on the needs of communities to develop WVUE statewide and local program priorities and allocate resources to address the needs identified. The specific objectives were to:

- Identify public issues that are perceived to be important by key decisionmakers across the state of West Virginia.
- Identify programmatic/intervention gaps that could be filled by our existing personnel and resources.
- Identify cross-cutting issues among the needs prioritized by decisionmakers and our previously determined critical issues in the state.



Today's youth are engrained with an entrepreneurial spirit. WVU Extension provides West Virginia's young people with skills and resources to pursue their passion.



Health and nutrition are important to all West Virginians. Our experts provide education and resources to improve our most pressing health care needs.



Methods

This decisionmakers' needs assessment was executed in four phases. In phase one, we used secondary data to establish trends across the state starting with the three pillars of WVU: education, health and prosperity as a guide. In phase two, we identified 58 community and individual-based issues using secondary and anecdotal data. We then grouped the issues under five pillars, including WVU's three pillars of education, health and prosperity, and adding community health, civic engagement and natural resource management. The 58 issues were reviewed by a panel of experts including the dean of WVU Extension, associate deans of WVU Extension, WVU Extension program unit directors, a rural economist and two evaluation specialists. In phase three, decisionmakers across the state were asked to rate the 58 issues according to their levels of importance through an online or paper survey. The structure of the survey instrument was modeled after the 2020 Kentucky Needs Assessment Study (Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, 2019).

Sample and Survey Administration

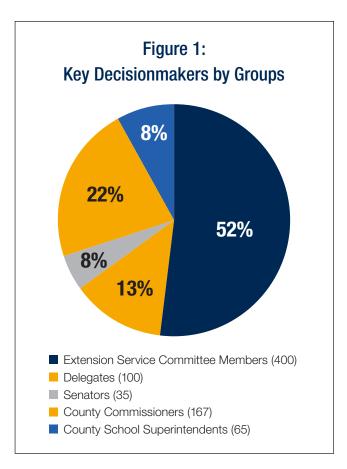
Due to time constraints, we used a purposeful sampling technique (Creswell, 2012) to narrow down stakeholder groups that are responsible for making key decisions across the state. Our final sample included 100 West Virginia delegates, 35 senators, 65 county school superintendents, 167 county commissioners and 400 individuals on Extension Service Committees for all West Virginia counties. Our survey targeted a total number of **767** key decisionmakers.

To reach the identified key decisionmakers, we obtained a list of email addresses, as well as office and home addresses. We mailed paper copies of the surveys to all decisionmakers identified using home and/or office addresses. The mailed surveys included self-addressed stamped envelopes for easy return and an on-line link with instructions on how to complete the survey online. A follow-up postcard was sent to stakeholders approximately two weeks after

the initial mailing date. This served as a reminder to those who may not have completed the on-line survey or returned the paper version. The survey opened in November 2021 and closed for analysis in February 2022.

Data Analysis

We analyzed closed-ended questions descriptively to rank the 58 public issues and the five prioritized issues under each pillar using means and frequencies, respectively. Respondents provided additional comments through an open-ended question included in the survey instrument. Qualitative data provided were analyzed thematically.





WVU Jackson's Mill, home to the nation's first 4-H camp, provides a host of activities and events each year. With hands-on learning opportunities in STEM, history and nature, the Mill is bringing unique experiences to our state's youths.

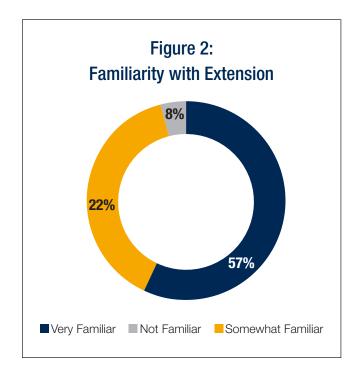


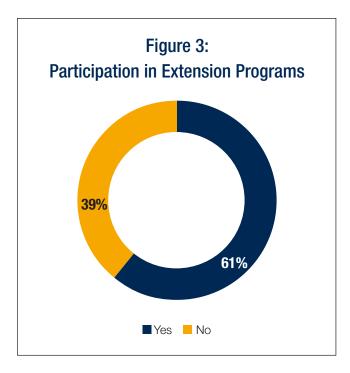
Results

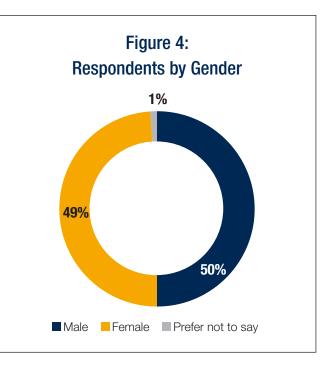
Of the 767 stakeholders that we administered the survey to, 271 stakeholders responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 35%. As we teased out regional data from the parent data, we discovered that we do not have data from Clay County. This could indicate non-response to the survey or non-response to the question that asked respondents to identify their county. Therefore, we were unable to specifically capture the number of respondents from Clay County. Regional brief reports have been written separately and are not included in this final report.

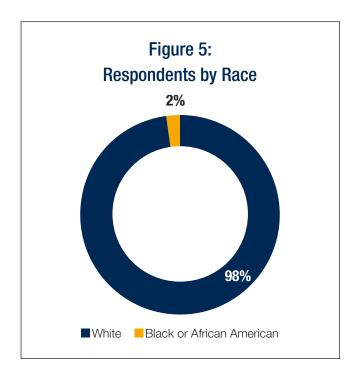
Description of Respondents

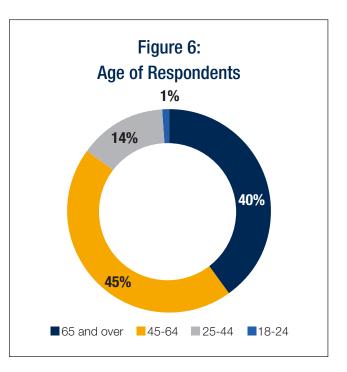
Respondents were asked about how familiar they were with WVU Extension, their gender, age, educational attainment and whether they have participated in WVU Extension programs. Of those who responded to the demographic questions, 50% of survey respondents identified as male and 87% respondents are between ages 25 and 64 years old. Only four respondents identified as non-white. Approximately 57% of respondents had at least a bachelor's degree, 61% of respondents or someone in their family currently participate in a WVU Extension program, and 57% indicated that they were "very familiar" with WVU Extension. All counties except Clay County were represented in the survey results.

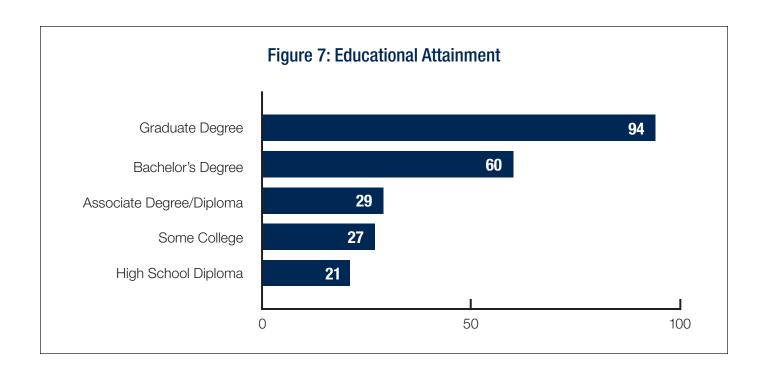


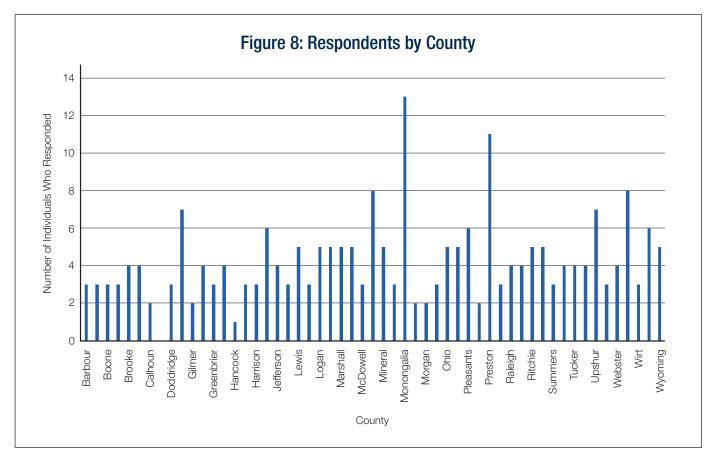












Note: Monongalia and Preston counties had the highest number of respondents, respectively. The bar chart does not show all counties represented in the survey.



Important Issues to Key Decisionmakers

The survey asked respondents to rate 58 statewide issues on a scale of "very important" to "not important" with 1 = Not important, 2 = Somewhat important, 3 = Important, and 4 = Very important (Table 1).

The 58 issues ranked are grouped under these five pillars:

- Education
- Prosperity

- Community Health and Civic Engagement (CH&CE)
- / Natural Resource Management (NRM)
- / Individual and Family Health (I&F Health)

Table 1: 58 Issues Ranked Acording to Their Importance

Rank	Pillar	Issues	
1	Education	Improving career readiness among youth ages 14-18	
2	Prosperity	Increasing household and business access to broadband to promote economic and educational development	3.77
3	I&F Health	Decreasing youth high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and arrests	3.75
4	Prosperity	Creating, retaining and growing local businesses	3.72
5	Education	Increasing youth life skills (e.g., resumé building, financial and resource management, conflict resolution, etc.)	3.69
6	Prosperity	Increasing the number of local jobs that pay a living wage	3.67
7	Prosperity	Attracting and retaining young people and families (ages 25-44) to reduce population decline in the state	
8	Education	Increasing access to professional education and/or certifications for workforce readiness	
9	Education	Increasing high school graduation rates	
10	Education	Increasing the number of youths who enroll in apprenticeship programs after high school graduation	
11	CH&CE	Developing youth leadership skills	
12	I&F Health	Improving individuals' physical health (e.g., reducing blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, etc.) and/or reducing chronic diseases	
13	CH&CE	Increasing a sense of pride, community belonging and connectedness	
14	Education	Increasing investments in (access to and quality of) early childhood education	

15	I&F Health	Improving mental health and stress management for youths and adults	3.53
16	I&F Health	Increasing positive parenting practices to promote child development and success	
17	CH&CE	Increasing the number of new community leaders and volunteers	3.52
18	Prosperity	Improving water and sewer infrastructure	3.52
19	I&F Health	Increasing support for grandparents who are raising grandchildren	3.51
20	CH&CE	Increasing youth participation in community service opportunities	3.51
21	Education	Increasing access to STEM resources for after school and school enrichment programs	3.49
22	Prosperity	Improving local food production and distribution (e.g., farmers market, farm-to-school, co-ops, etc.)	3.48
23	Prosperity	Increasing access to affordable, quality childcare that leads to school readiness	3.47
24	NRM	Increasing water quality and conservation	3.46
25	Prosperity	Increasing the ability of individuals to successfully manage their money (e.g., debt management, credits, savings, investments, etc.)	
26	Prosperity	Reducing the unemployment rate	3.44
27	CH&CE	Increasing adult participation in community service opportunities	3.43
28	CH&CE	Improving adult leadership skills	3.42
29	Prosperity	Increasing farm/business access to capital to promote entrepreneurship	3.42
30	I&F Health	Increasing support for adults caring for aging parents	3.42
31	NRM	Improving community waste management (e.g., solid waste management, dumping, recycling, etc.)	3.39
32	Prosperity	Increasing farm profitably through best practices	3.37
33	I&F Health	Increasing access to affordable and healthy food options	3.36
34	Prosperity	Improving transportation infrastructure	3.36
35	I&F Health	Increasing accessibility for individuals with mobility issues and disabilities (e.g., physical, mental, intellectual, etc.)	3.33
36	Prosperity	Increasing community comprehensive and land-use planning that leads to economic development and community well-being	3.32

37	Prosperity	Improving fiscal management and local budgeting practices	3.32
38	Prosperity	Improving the condition of community spaces, such as parks, historical buildings and main streets	
39	NRM	Increasing the use of sustainable agriculture production and pest management strategies/techniques	3.28
40	Prosperity	Increasing the receipt of state and federal grant dollars by local organizations	3.27
41	Education	Increasing the number of youths who enroll in a two- or four-year college after high school graduation	3.26
42	I&F Health	Increasing access to or enhancing places for physical activity	3.26
43	CH&CE	Increasing cultural awareness and appreciation of the community's population	3.23
44	Prosperity	Addressing vacant and dilapidated buildings and/or legacy sites (e.g., brownfields, abandoned mines and gas wells, etc.)	3.23
45	NRM	Preparing for natural disasters and variations in climate (e.g., flooding and storm damage, drought, extreme temperatures, etc.)	3.22
46	Prosperity	Improving emergency preparedness and disaster response (e.g., fire, EMS, 911, etc.)	3.21
47	CH&CE	Increasing voter turnout	3.21
48	Prosperity	Increasing the availability of quality housing for the workforce	3.20
49	I&F Health	Increasing access to public health information and resources (vaccines, etc.)	3.19
50	Prosperity	Identifying and developing recreation assets for economic development	3.17
51	Prosperity	Increasing household and business energy-saving behaviors/energy efficiency	3.17
52	Prosperity	Increasing agriculture production for non-traditional populations (women, young farmers, new farmers, veterans, those with physical disabilities, minorities, etc.)	3.17
53	NRM	Sustainably managing woodlots and forest resources	3.15
54	Prosperity	Improving workplace safety to reduce accidents and improve business operations	3.13

55	NRM	Maintaining/improving property for wildlife management	3.10
56	NRM	Managing hobby farms/managing small acreage farm operation	3.04
57	I&F Health	Improving food handling practices for restaurants, cottage industries, schools, etc.	3.00
58	NRM	Maintaining trees, gardens, yards and landscapes	2.97

Top 5 Issues Under Each Pillar

Another prompt in the survey asked respondents to indicate their top two issues under each pillar. Results are displayed in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 2: Prioritized Issues Under the Pillar of Education

	Issues	f
1.	Improving career readiness among youth ages 14-18	73
2.	Increasing youth life skills (e.g., resume building)	61
3.	Increasing the number of youths who enroll in apprenticeship programs after high school graduation	50
4.	Increasing investments in (access to and quality of) early childhood	43
5.	Increasing access to STEM resources for after school and school enrichment programs	30

Table 3: Prioritized Issues Under the Pillar of Prosperity

	Issues	f
1.	Increasing household and business access to broadband to promote economic and educational development	92
2.	Increasing the number of local jobs that pay a living wage	59
3.	Creating, retaining and growing local businesses	57
4.	Attracting and retaining young people and families (ages 25-44) to reduce population decline in the state	51
5.	Improving water and sewer infrastructure	35

Table 4: Prioritized Issues Under the Pillar of Individual and Family Health

	Issues	f
1.	Decreasing youth high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and arrests	70
2.	Improving individuals' physical health (e.g., reducing blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, etc.) and/or reducing chronic diseases	53
3.	Improving mental health and stress management for youth and adults	48
4.	Increasing positive parenting practices to promote child development and success	43
5.	Increasing support for grandparents who are raising grandchildren	31

Table 5: Prioritized Issues Under the Pillar of Community Health and Civic Engagement

	Issues	f
1.	Developing youth leadership skills	60
2.	Increasing a sense of pride, community belonging and connectedness	60
3.	Increasing youth participation in community service opportunities	48
4.	Increasing the number of new community leaders and volunteers	44
5.	Increasing adult participation in community service opportunities	35

Table 6: Prioritized Issues Under the Pillar of Natural Resource Management

	Issues	f
1.	Increasing water quality and conservation	69
2.	Improving community waste management (e.g., solid waste management, dumping, recycling, etc.)	67
3.	Preparing for natural disasters and variations in climate (e.g., flooding and storm damage, drought, extreme temperatures, etc.)	41
4.	Managing hobby farms/managing small acreage farm operations	31
5.	Increasing the use of sustainable agriculture production and pest management strategies/ techniques	28

Important Public Issues in Respondents' Comments

The decisionmakers' survey included an open- ended question to allow respondents to give additional comments about important issues in their communities. Eighty-eight (88) respondents provided additional comments. Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using the five pillars as a thematic framework. Table 7 is a summary of the issue themes that emerged from respondents' comments.

Table 7: Issue	Themes in Re	spondents'	Additional	Comments
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Issue Themes	Frequency of Mention	Sample Quotes from Respondents
Prosperity: Improving employment opportunities	9	 "Too many living here, but not enough jobs. This unbalance needs to be worked on if the county is to make any major improvements." " now that coal has declined so severely people, and our youth especially, have little to look forward to as far as job and career prospects. Our best and brightest will continue to leave the area for jobs and economic opportunities elsewhere."
Individual and Family Health: Improving health and nutrition	9	"Healthy living and eating habits should be taught." "Covid has created many mental health challenges."
Individual and Family Health: Decreasing substance use	7	"Get drugs off the streets. Start young with kids so they will know that can do it." "I believe the substance abuse issue in our area needs addressed. Not only in our youth but our adult population"
Prosperity: Improving Infrastructure	7	"We need housing options that are affordable." "We should all be working towards broadband coverage, water and sewage"
Education: Increasing youth and adult life skills	6	 " Also learning the value of money and how to write a check and balance a checkbook." "Fiscal responsibility should be taught. Independence of social media should be taught. As young adult enters the workforce, resume building and interview skills should be taught."

Unintended Findings

Other comments provided by respondents were treated as unintended findings of this needs assessment study. Respondents cited program improvement comments that could improve WVU Extension program visibility and participation. Comments provided include increasing county agent hires to improve programing in counties, using technology to enhance visibility, and increasing Extension's volunteer base to aid effective programming. Other comments thanked WVU Extension for contributing to the development of their communities.

Table 8: Unintended Findings

Themes	Frequency of Mention	Sample Quotes
Program visibility and participation	12	"Seek all ways to make education available, attainable and valuable by using technology expanding participation and broader resources on virtual platforms!"
		" need opportunities for youth but need more adults to help. We need an easier way to connect the kids with the adults. We need a more manageable way to coordinate youth and adult activities."
		"There seems to be a struggle between the old guard (only dealing with animals) and the future direction of Extension programs The conflict is causing many of us to move away from the entire program."
Appreciation	10	"The Extension Service provides so much opportunity for youth in our county. And I am grateful for the agents and program assistants who serve here" "We have a very active Extension office and great people there!"

References

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research.* Pearson Education: Boston, MA

Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. (2019). Kentucky Extension Community Assessment Statewide Survey.



WVU Extension continues to evolve to meet the needs West Virginians. A new apprenticeship program, a partnership with WVU, WVU Extension, the West Virginia Carpenters Training Center, and the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Council, provides opportunities for apprentices to earn a two-year degree while completing their training.



Educational programming is critical to West Virginia youths. WVU Extension offers camping, literacy, STEM and other activities to prepare them to succeed.



Improving lives and livelihoods for all West Virginians

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