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## **Building Community Practice Competencies Globally through the Community Tool Box**

Christina M. Holt, Stephen B. Fawcett, and Jerry A. Schultz  
University of Kansas

Bill Berkowitz  
University of Massachusetts Lowell

Thomas J. Wolff  
Tom Wolff and Associates

Vincent T. Francisco  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

### Author Contact Information:

Christina Holt, MA, Work Group for Community Health and Development, 1000 Sunnyside Avenue, Dole Center, Room 4082, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045. Telephone: 785-864-0533. E-mail: [cholt@ku.edu](mailto:cholt@ku.edu).

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## Building Community Practice Competencies Globally through the Community Tool Box

### Abstract

People throughout the world are working together to improve conditions in which they live. Although the issues and resources vary by context, what people actually do to effect change—core competencies of assessment, planning, action, evaluation, and sustainability—may be quite similar. To examine what competencies may be most valued in community practice, this report uses data analytics for what users are accessing in the Community Tool Box <http://ctb.ku.edu>. This free resource for community health and development, with over 1.7 million unique visitors annually from over 200 countries, showed a six-fold increase in users during the past year (from November 2011 to November 2012). When we examined what users were accessing, the results showed greater interest in some particular competencies such as assessing community needs and resources, developing strategic and action plans, and enhancing cultural competence. Patterns of use suggest that there may be core competencies valued by community members seeking to change conditions and outcomes that matter, which may help inform training and professional development for the millions of people worldwide working to promote health, human development, and social justice.

*Keywords:* Global competencies, capacity-building tools, community practice, workforce development, dissemination, online tools, Community Tool Box

People joining together to take action on issues that matter to them; it happens each hour in every corner of the world. The issue addressed may vary—clean drinking water in Kenya, drug free communities in New York, natural disasters in San Salvador, violence prevention in Los Angeles, and educating women about HIV/AIDS in Uganda (CTB Community Innovators, [http://ctb.ku.edu/en/out\\_of\\_the\\_box/finalists.aspx](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/out_of_the_box/finalists.aspx) Accessed: December 2, 2012). Those taking action include people with little or lots of formal education, from youth to elders, and those with formal positions of authority to the newly empowered. They come from and seek change in multiple sectors including government ministries, schools, health organizations, businesses, and NGOs and community-based organizations.

Despite the differences in issues and context, there are many commonalities in *what people do* to take action. To illustrate, those working in the Jikaze resettlement camp for internally displaced peoples in Kenya began by listening to people's needs and meeting with the village committee which was composed of house block leaders, community leaders, and elders (Assessment). Working with the village committee, the group planned relief and development projects including those related to housing, food, clean drinking water, and schooling (Planning). Working side-by-side, they organized themselves to build houses and engage in other

development activities (Action). The group used a poverty index to track the type, frequency and intensity of deprivations (in health, education, and standard of living) to help understand whether its programs led to improvement (Evaluation). The Jikaze group worked to keep its development efforts going including through sales of specialized produce to high-end restaurants in Nairobi (Sustainability) ([http://ctb.ku.edu/en/out\\_of\\_the\\_box/finalists/finalist\\_5.aspx](http://ctb.ku.edu/en/out_of_the_box/finalists/finalist_5.aspx), Accessed: December 2, 2012).

Our collective experience tells us that—whether in Kenya or Kansas—people taking action in communities need to be able to: a) *Assess* what is going on, identifying community needs and resources; b) *Plan* activities to achieve intended results, including what will be done and who will do it; c) *Act* to change conditions by developing and implementing interventions; d) *Evaluate* whether they are making progress, using the information to make adjustments; and d) *Sustain* what is needed to meet their goals. Although the issues and resources may vary from place to place, what people do—the core competencies—are quite similar.

Yet, the full complement of skills and competencies for collaborative action are rarely learned, even by those attending universities. In 1994, when our team began work on the Community Tool Box, <http://ctb.ku.edu/>, we saw the opportunity to help fill this gap with a free Internet-based resource that provided tools for learning and doing this work.

Now, almost 20 years on, the Community Tool Box offers thousands of pages of educational materials used by millions of people in over 200 different countries (Fawcett, Francisco, et al., 2000; Fawcett, Schultz, et al., 2008). Worldwide use is enhanced through both English and Spanish (and Arabic, by mid-2013) versions of the Community Tool Box. Data regarding what users are seeking to learn provides a window into what competencies are valued by people taking action around the world.

This aim of this empirical case study is to better understand what skills and competencies for community action may be important to end users. We use Google Analytics to examine the distribution of user sessions by category of competence (e.g., community assessment, planning, evaluation). Data from worldwide users of the Community Tool Box were analyzed to see patterns of user choice, an indicator of the importance that end users place on particular competencies related to community work.

### Community Tool Box as Context

#### Guiding Assumptions and Values

Several assumptions and related values underlie the Community Tool Box: 1) Community problems can often be effectively addressed by community members and their allies; 2) To do so, community members will benefit from increased competency to act; 3) We can teach and stimulate use of basic community competencies over the Internet, through online instruction; and 4) By so doing, we can potentially reach, teach, and engage many millions of people worldwide who would otherwise have little opportunity to learn and few chances to become involved in transforming conditions that affect their lives.

Recent global trends support at least the latter two assumptions. About one-third of the world's population was Internet users in 2012, more than five times the percentage in 2000. In the global south, roughly defined as Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, such use grew by approximately tenfold according to Internet World Stats. Our own global Tool Box traffic (from outside the United States) also has increased significantly, from 34% of all users in 2007 to 48% in 2012. The challenge for the Tool Box was and is to strengthen community competencies in real-world practice.

#### Historical Development

Since its beginning in 1994, the Community Tool Box was designed to build both individual and community competencies. This is reflected in our Tool Box founding vision of “people – locally and

globally – taking action together to change conditions that affect their lives,” and in our original mission of “promoting community health and development by connecting people, ideas and resources.” A fundamental question from the start was how to convert that vision and mission into effective and efficient organization of content.

#### Content Organization

As the website developed, we organized content in two primary and overlapping ways. First, we compiled a list of specific skill areas (e.g., conducting listening sessions, identifying community assets), and created self-contained, step-by-step, how-to-do-it instructional modules for each one. We called these modules “sections.” We then organized these sections into content clusters (e.g., assessing community needs and resources), which we called “chapters.” Then and now, these sections and chapters form the basis of our Table of Contents.

#### Toolkits: Supports for Core Competencies

In a parallel organization, we developed a list of key community competencies, to complement and supplement the sections and chapters. These core competencies are shared by many related disciplines such as public health, community psychology, and international development (e.g., Barry, et al., 2009). Based upon practitioner interviews, literature review, and our own collective experience, we arrived at 16 core competencies:

1. Creating and Maintaining Coalitions and Partnerships
2. Assessing Community Needs and Resources
3. Analyzing Problems and Goals
4. Developing a Framework or Model of Change
5. Developing Strategic and Action Plans
6. Building Leadership
7. Developing an Intervention
8. Increasing Participation and Membership
9. Enhancing Cultural Competence
10. Advocating for Change
11. Influencing Policy Development
12. Evaluating the Initiative
13. Implementing a Social Marketing Effort
14. Writing a Grant Application for Funding
15. Improving Organizational Management and Development
16. Sustaining the Work or Initiative

For each core competency, we then provided a “toolkit,” a set of supports, for learning the basic skills areas. By clicking on a given competency, a Tool Box user will find an outline for how to build the competency, links to relevant Tool Box sections, and real-world examples underscoring application

with different issues and in different cultures and contexts.

### **Dissemination, Translation, and Cultural Adaptation**

Of course, it was not sufficient to create online content, whether in toolkit or other form. We needed to ensure that potential Tool Box users both knew about this content and could access it easily. In early years, most of our dissemination efforts took place in the United States; we spoke at conferences, wrote articles for U.S.-based journals, and distributed printed brochures through our own domestic networks (Holt et al., in press). But gradually we saw that increasing percentages of users were coming from outside the U.S., and realized that linguistic access was also essential. Only about 5% of people in the world speak English as a first language (though this does not reflect the percentage who understand written English). Clearly, an English-only Tool Box would be a significant barrier to achieving worldwide reach.

Translation was therefore necessary – in particular, translation that could capture the needed subtlety of expression and adapt content to the specific cultural context. Through efforts of grassroots volunteers, dedicated faculty and students, and eventually a modest grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we arranged to have the Tool Box translated into Spanish by native speakers. Given the vast size of the Tool Box, this was an ambitious project, but a full Spanish translation and light cultural adaptation of all Tool Box content was completed in 2009. A similar effort is now underway to translate and culturally adapt the Tool Box into Arabic, through partnership with colleagues at the American University of Beirut and the Arab Resource Collective in Lebanon, with a scheduled completion date of mid-2013.

Additional language translations are in the planning stages. In addition, collaborative planning efforts are under way by community psychologists representing different countries and regions to expand online instruction in competency-based community development, including but not necessarily limited to the Tool Box (Berkowitz, Fernandez, Vargas-Moniz, and Vega, 2012).

Establishment and dissemination of competency-based content, however, are only initial steps. We need to learn more about what competencies are accessed and used in practice. This leads to the main purpose and contribution of this study.

### **Methods**

To help determine access and use of particular content (competencies) of the Community Tool Box, we relied on website software. This software identifies unique visitors to the website and what content they accessed. Every time a user clicks on a link, a new row is created in a log file (ascii data files) with different fields of information. Available data include: a) the uniform resource locator (URL; the information about what page on what website is being accessed), b) the date and time, and c) an identifier for the person that is accessing the website (the IP address).

We used Google Analytics (<http://analytics.google.com/>) to determine how users were accessing the Community Tool Box, and to allow for analyses involved in this investigation. Rather than accessing the web logs directly on the website, a code was placed in the root director that allowed Google to track accesses or “hits” to the website. Every page has multiple hits possible, since it is composed of elements stored in different directories in the file structure of the website, or in a database that is accessed through programming on the web pages. Because of the organizational structure of the Internet, the absolute number of users is likely underrepresented by Google Analytics. However, this is less of a methodological problem in viewing trends since this consistent measurement approach was used throughout the study.

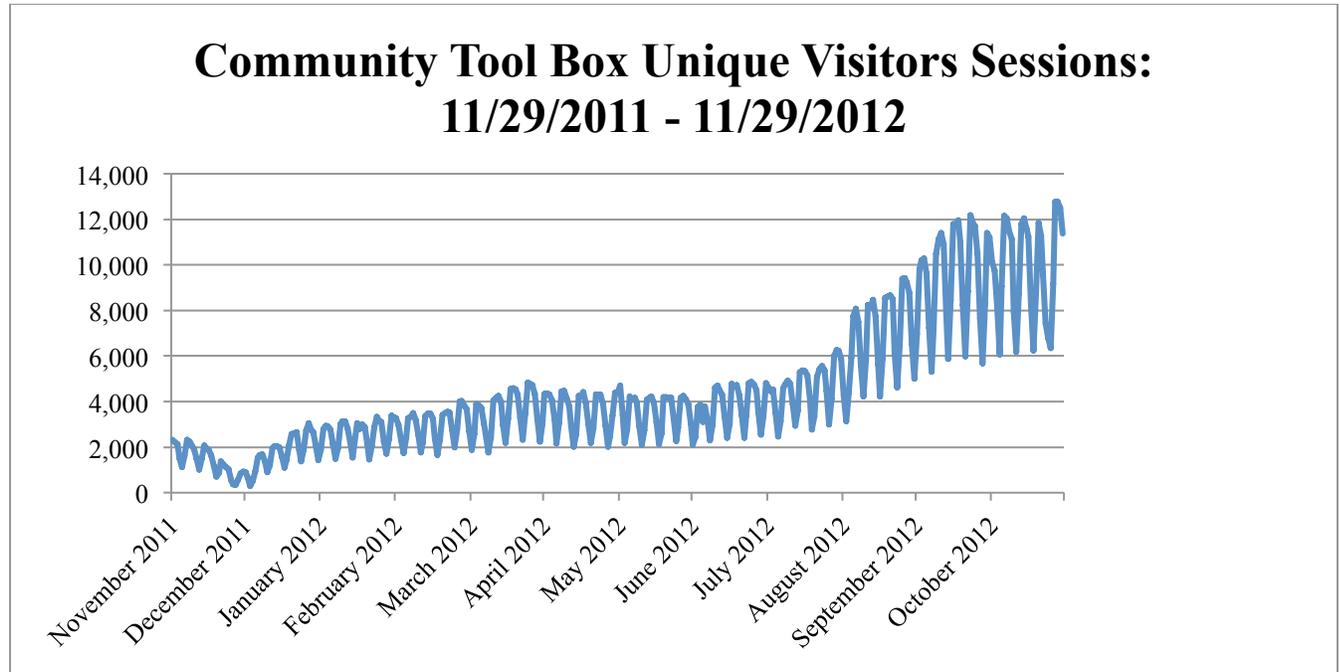
In this study, we tracked visitor sessions, content accessed by the visitors, and the country from where they accessed the website over a recent 12-month period. We were also able to obtain information from site visitors’ browser settings that allowed us to know the native language set by the user. Because of the organization of the Community Tool Box, we could also obtain information about specific files that users accessed. We associated those files with competencies and keywords, allowing us a fine-grained analysis of use. Data from the 100 most frequently viewed resources within the Tool Box were used in this analysis.

### **Results**

Figure 1 displays unique visitor sessions of the Community Tool Box between November 29, 2011 and November 29, 2012. In November of 2011, high-traffic days brought more than 2,000 visitors to the Community Tool Box site. Typically, these were non-weekend days with peak days being Monday and Tuesday and decreasing over the workweek. As of the writing of this manuscript (December 2012), site traffic has increased to more than 12,000 visitors on

high-traffic days, with an all-time site high of 12,779 unique visitors (on December 3, 2012). This comprises an approximately six-fold increase in user sessions over a one-year period. This increase is correlated with efforts our staff took to enhance

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) by manually adding keywords and descriptions to pages within the website. As a result, the Community Tool Box will top 1.5 million visitors in 2012.



*Figure 1.* Graph of unique Community Tool Box visitor sessions per day over time between November 29, 2011 and November 29, 2012.

Examining data regarding unique visitor sessions for English and Spanish versions of the Community Tool Box shows similar patterns of usage. Visitors accessing the English version of the Community Tool Box represented approximately 84 percent of overall site users; visitors accessing the Spanish translated and culturally-adapted version of the Community Tool Box represent approximately 16 percent of overall site users. This represents a ten-fold increase in Spanish visitors to the site in the past year.

Figure 2 displays user preference for specific content, an indicator of competency areas in which users seek guidance. The most popular content accessed by competency (related Tool Box chapter, section, or toolkit) were: 1) assessing community needs and resources (258,164 pageviews); 2) developing strategic and action plans (131,979 pageviews); 3) enhancing cultural competence (126,670 pageviews);

4) promoting interest in community issues (122,955 pageviews); 5) improving organizational management and development (89,262 pageviews); 6) evaluating the initiative (85,954 pageviews); 7) building leadership (71,802 pageviews); and 8) analyzing problems and goals (58,423 pageviews). Other popular content included: 9) developing a framework or model of change (27,995 pageviews); 10) facilitation (25,329 pageviews); 11) developing an intervention (24,491 pageviews); 12) sustaining the work or initiative (18,817 pageviews); 13) writing a grant application for funding (18,762 pageviews); 14) increasing participation and membership (14,408 pageviews); 15) advocating for change (13,478 pageviews); and 16) creating and maintaining coalitions and partnerships (7,757 pageviews). The remaining pageviews were distributed among the many other topic areas in the 300 plus sections of the Community Tool Box.

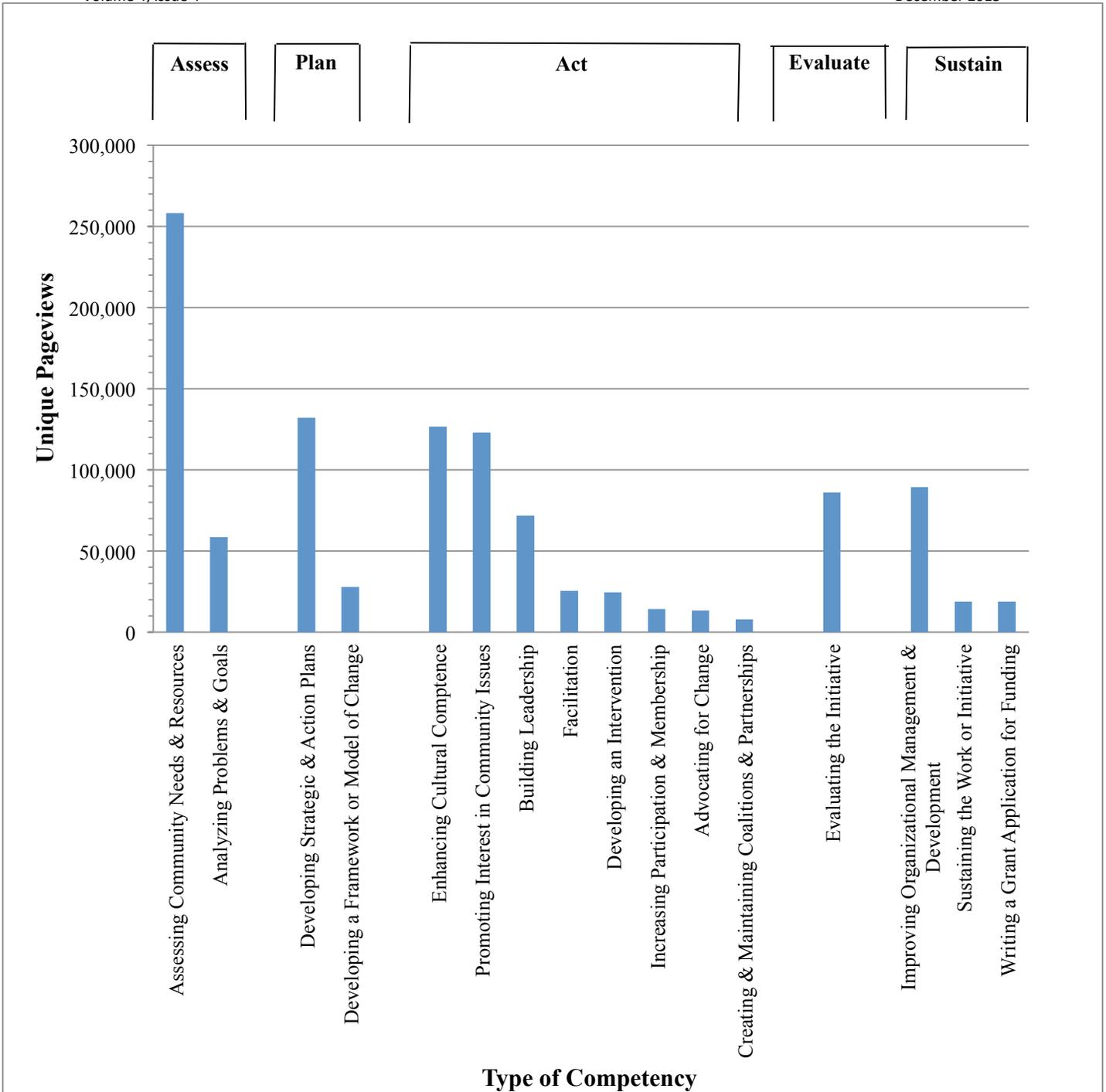


Figure 2. Data on worldwide ranking of interest (pageviews) by core competency area (from 100 most frequently accessed pages on the Community Tool Box). Data displayed represents pageviews between November 29, 2011 and November 29, 2012.

**Discussion**

This study examines building community practice competencies globally through the Community Tool

Box (CTB). These access data provide an indicator of skill areas sought by people taking action on issues that matter to them in communities around the world. These 16 competencies (toolkits) in the Community

Tool Box overlap significantly with other lists of competencies for practitioners of community building and health promotion. For instance, they correspond closely with identified competencies in Community Psychology (Society for Community Research and Action, 2012) and the Galway Consensus for core competencies in health promotion (Barry, et al., 2009).

Although the Google Analytics site usage data does not directly inform how the competencies are applied in communities, it does shed light on which materials are accessed via the web for enhancing competencies in community practice. Additionally, the Community Tool Box Guestbook, <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/GuestbookList.aspx>, offers personal stories of use of the CTB submitted by people working in communities around the world who are taking action on various community problems and goals.

Disseminating competency-building resources to a broad and appropriate global audience can be a challenge. Since the start in 1994, the CTB team has utilized traditional dissemination methods such as eNewsletters, conference presentations, partnerships, and journal articles. CTB usage data show a dramatic increase in user sessions recently, a six-fold uptake in the past year, totaling over 1.7 million user sessions. Recent marked increases in user sessions since summer 2012 are largely associated with the CTB team's concentrated efforts to affect Search Engine Optimization (Holt et al., 2013, in press). This Search Engine Optimization essentially involves manually adding keywords and content descriptions to our content management system, making it easier for Internet search engines to "find" and display CTB content when people are seeking information about community practice.

It is also important to note that translation and cultural adaptation reduce barriers to use, as suggested by recent Spanish CTB usage data. Since full publication of the Spanish CTB in 2009, Spanish-language usage has grown ten-fold, now accounting for 16% of all CTB site usage. This makes a case for extending the reach of the Community Tool Box through further translation and cultural adaptation. The CTB team's aspiration is to partner with collaborators to make these free resources available in all major United Nations languages.

The most frequently accessed content areas of the Community Tool Box overlap closely with core competencies in community practice. As illustrated in Figure 2, a number of the top-accessed competencies relate to the Action phase of community work; for instance, the skills of promoting interest in

community issues and building leadership. The single most frequently accessed competency area was assessing community needs and resources, with over 250,000 page views, almost double the next closest section. This is not surprising since community assessment is required by many funders; and it helps lay the groundwork for other phases including planning, action, and evaluation. Additionally, community needs assessments are being undertaken by public health departments wishing to meet newly established standards for accreditation by the Public Health Accreditation Board, and by non-profit hospitals engaging in community health needs assessments to meet new requirements laid forth by the Affordable Care Act. These new consequences may be driving demand for supports for how to conduct community assessments.

Other top competencies, such as facilitation, are skills utilized during all phases of community work—assessment, planning, taking action, evaluation, and planning for sustainability. Other topic areas of high usage (between 100,000 to 150,000 page views) included cultural competence and strategic and action planning. Additional categories of high usage (between 50,000-100,000 page views) included the competencies of evaluation, leadership, organizational management, and analyzing problems and goals. These highly sought-out competencies are essential to community practice regardless of community issue or goal addressed, and the high level of demand may suggest that massive open online courses (MOOCs), graduate training, and professional development emphasize these skills more.

### Conclusions

Reviewing data on how many people are accessing how-to materials for different community practice competencies helps us understand user interest. But, it is not a sensitive marker of learning. Although the Internet overcomes many barriers to access and cost, it needs to be coupled with models of training and coaching that engage people in learning how to apply these skills in their realities. Technical aspects of the Internet, such as search engine optimization, must be attended to for web resources to actually be accessed by users globally. Language translation and cultural adaptation must be addressed if learning resources are to be available and appropriate, particularly if they are to serve those working in the poorest regions of the world. Future aspirations include enhancing user engagement by integrating video supports, enabling peer-to-peer exchange, and developing additional ways for site visitors to interact meaningfully with the content.

Now almost 20 years on, our starting assumptions and values still guide the development and dissemination of the Community Tool Box. Feedback from users strengthens our belief that community-determined problems can be addressed by people working together. When community members have basic competencies—to assess, plan, act, evaluate, and sustain—they can change conditions and outcomes that matter. We can both teach and stimulate use of basic community competencies over the Internet, using resources such as the Community Tool Box. By so doing, working together, we can connect and learn with millions of people worldwide who are engaged in transforming conditions that affect their lives.

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<http://communityhealth.ku.edu/>.

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