

Using Clustering Workshops to Write the Core Plan

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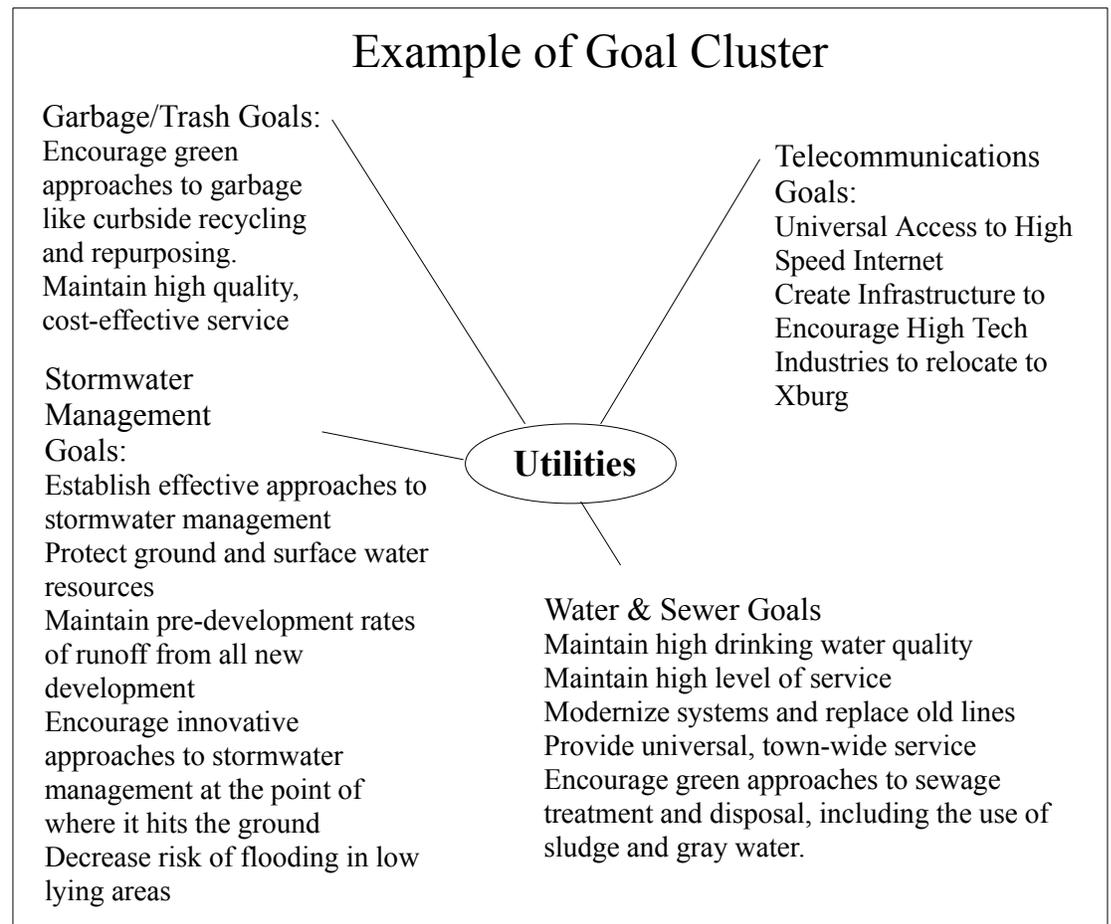
Introduction to Clustering

Resources:

Environmental
Subject Cluster:
Greenbrier
County, West
Virginia
Comprehensive
Plan Process,
2008

Clustering was developed not as a planning tool but as a brainstorming / invention method for college Freshman Composition. It was designed to help students generate ideas and organization for their essays. While it was only moderately successful as a tool for students, it is, perhaps, one of the best tools for generating the materials for the core portion of a comprehensive plan. At a minimum, participants will be able to develop a preliminary list of goals, sub-goals or objectives, and strategies, forming the backbone of the plan.

Clustering uses word and idea association to work from a general topic to specific points. The level of detail increases as participants add layers to the cluster. While list making can be substituted for clustering, it lacks organization and requires more sorting and interpretation on the part of staff following the meeting.



Group Dynamics and Organization:

An input session using clustering can be organized three ways: with mobile groups or with stationary groups. There are benefits and disadvantages to both approaches.

Mobile Groups. The mobile group approach requires setting up a table (subject station), with no more than 10 chairs, for each subject: planning, government, economic development, parks and recreation, and so forth. Participants are assigned to groups (the number of groups will depend on a combination of the number of subjects and the total number of participants). Each group starts with a specific subject, works on the for a specific period of time (10 to 15 minutes), and then moves to the next table.

On the plus side, mobile groups allow all meeting participants to have a say on all of the subjects., rather than being limited to one or two. The approach works best with meetings with 100 or fewer participants. While it can be used with larger meetings, it may require additional pre-planning and preparation, and may require setting up more than one set of tables. On the whole, the mobile group approach generates more ideas, but typically lacks specific detail. The mobile group approach requires more time and is best suited for a day long community meeting or multiple sessions. Plan for at least five hours spread over one to two sessions. Finally, if you are working with citizens with limited mobility, you can assign the participants to a specific table and move the subject materials. The approach tends to be a bit more chaotic and can add time to your meeting.

Stationary Groups: Large Groups

With the stationary group approach, the participants remain at the same table. Unlike the mobile approach where participants are randomly assigned to groups, stationary groups are formed from citizens with specific interests (transportation, utilities, quality of life, economic development, and so on).

This approach works far better with large groups (more than 100 attendees), very small groups (fewer than 20), and with participants with mobility issues than does the mobile group approach. Participants are assigned to a specific subject and work with their group members to generate goals, objectives, and strategies. The stationary approach takes approximately half the time of the mobile group approach, but the ideas, while more detailed, tend to be far more narrowly drawn and represent a limited range of opinions and voices.

Project Supplies

10 to 12 sheets of 36" by 48" paper, preferably unlined.
30 to 36 colored pens (3 each of 10 to 12 colors).
1 white legal pad and various handouts.
2-3 rolls of drafting tape (or another tape that is easily removed from walls).
1 egg or baking timer.

Project Timeframe:

Normally, clustering workshops take 4 to 5 hours. For the mobile group workshops, the timeframe depends on the number of subjects. You should allow 15 minutes per subject during the group portion of the project and an additional 15 minutes per subject for discussion. If you have 10 subjects, the initial input session will take 2 1/2 hours and the "session wrap up" will take an additional 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 hours. As noted above, the stationary group exercises take slightly less time (3.5 to 4

hours. Because of the level of activity involved in this project, make sure you build in a couple of breaks to give participants a chance to stretch, get something to drink, and take a breather.

Organizing a Clustering Workshop.

The key to successful community meetings is pre-planning. There are five key issues you have to address before the meeting: 1) Determine personnel; 2) Generate the list of topics and set up the workshop materials; 3) Establish the agenda for the meeting, including breaks; 4) Schedule an appropriate space; and 5) Determine how the results of the workshop will be published.

Determine Personnel. The chances are the majority of work on a plan will fall on the members of the Planning Commission, on staff, on the steering committee or citizen advisory committee established to oversee the development of the comprehensive plan, or on other citizen volunteers. Determine, in advance, who is going to be responsible for facilitating the workshop; who is going to be responsible for typing up the materials from the workshop; and who is going to be responsible for disseminating the information to the public. Check with your public schools. Most English teachers either use a form of clustering in the classroom or learned it in their English pedagogy classes in college. Planning Commissioners or citizen volunteers should be prepared to attend the community workshop and provide some guidance.

Generate the List of General Planning Topics. Your state comprehensive plan enabling act should supply you with a list of general subjects which the state has determined should be included in your plan. Most states require chapters on Transportation, Utilities and Infrastructure, Environment, Economic Development, Historic Preservation, Housing, Public Safety, and Education. Check your list of subjects against your specific state requirements to make sure you are covering all of the bases. In addition, you may find that you need to add subjects to the list based on other public input (surveys, focus groups, etc.). Prior to the workshop, write one subject in medium size letters (one inch to one and a half inches in height) in the middle of a large sheet of paper (preferably 36" x 48"). Draw a circle around the word. Repeat the process for all of the subjects. To facilitate the process, you may want to add it important sub-topics for each subject.

Typically, flip chart paper is used; however, if you do not have access to large sheets of paper, check with a local printer, local newspaper, or with your high school's art department. The chances are one of the three will have large sheets. The type and quality of the paper is not as important as the size, although if you end up with newsprint, make sure you put newspaper or poster board underneath the sheets to prevent ink from bleeding through to the table tops.

Establish an Agenda for the Workshop. The meeting schedule/agenda should provide participants with ample time to complete the assigned task or tasks within a fixed timeframe. For the mobile groups clustering project, fifteen minutes is ample time to write a preliminary list of suggestions or add on to the list of suggestions from a previous group. Groups should not feel like they need to answer every possible question or to get locked into filling the page. If you have 10 topics, you will need to allow for a minimum of 2.5 hours to complete the initial task. A good workshop agenda provides a timeframe for the meeting and a brief explanation of what is expected. Make sure that you include break time approximately once every 90 minutes or so. This will give your participants a chance to stretch their legs, use the facilities, or get something to drink. Each agenda item should be clearly stated and have specific amount of time allotted to each task. If you assign too much time to a task, you run the risk of participants losing focus and if you set too short a timeframe, your participants may get frustrated. A sample agenda for each approach has been included at the end of this guide. An agenda should include the following: 1) date and location of the workshop; 2) clearly defined schedule; 3) names and, where applicable titles, of speakers; 4) brief description of each item on the agenda. For

Journal Resources:

Sample Agenda,
with Annotations

purposes of organization, it is helpful to have an annotated agenda for your own reference that includes the set-up and take down tasks and additional notes.

Schedule an Appropriate Space. Cluster projects require a lot of elbow room. Each sheet will be placed on a separate table (one subject per table), so you will need enough space to accommodate tables, participants, and comfortable circulation space. In other words, participants need enough space to work and to move around. The best locations for this kind of project include school cafeterias, church basements, and community rooms--places with mobile chairs and tables. Do not use auditoriums or meeting chambers.

Conducting the Workshop

Resources:

Sample Sign-in
Sheet

Organization. Before participants arrive, set up the same number of tables you have subjects for and place a tent card with a number on each table. Set up a "sign in" table where you have sign in sheets, agendas and other meeting materials, and name tags with the table number. Assign participants to the tables. Unless a participant strongly objects, make sure you assign couples to different groups. Do not assign more than one elected or appointed official to a group. If elected or appointed officials attend the workshop, you want them to interact with citizens rather than each other. On the sign up sheet, make sure you get participants' email addresses. This gives you a cost effective way of providing project updates and reminder announcements for future meetings.

Beginning of the Meeting. Start by welcoming the participants to the workshop and thanking them for their time. Most people like to have their time contributions acknowledged. Make sure you repeat the acknowledgement at the end of the workshop as well. After the initial greetings, introduce yourself and other workshop "staff" so that participants know who to stop and ask questions. While most elected officials like to be acknowledged at the beginning of the meeting, I found that it tends to have a disruptive influence and would recommend against it. You can thank them at the end of the meeting if you so choose, but placing a recognized value on their participation tends to dampen participation on the part of citizens, primarily out of respect for their positions. Take a couple of minutes to ask participants in each mobile or stationary group to introduce themselves to the rest of their group. People tend to get along better during workshops if they can place a name with a face and feel like they know the other participants in their group. It helps to establish both mutual respect and trust, both of which are necessary in-order for the workshop process to work.

Take a few minutes to go over the comprehensive planning process (how does this workshop fit in with the overall process), the workshop process (what do they need to do during the workshop) and the goals for the workshop (what does the workshop accomplish and why is it important). Participants like to know not only how to do something, but also why what they are doing is important. The participants are volunteering their time, and most would like to know that there is some return on their investment. In a public input session, you do not want anyone to respond with "why bother!" Leave a few minutes at the end of the introduction for questions. Make it clear that you are answering questions about the evening's festivities and let participants know that they can ask the facilitators subject specific questions during the festivities. Do not spend more than 10 minutes on the question/answer period.

Finally, make sure each group designates at least one spokesperson and two to three members as note takers (the folks that actually put the stuff on the project sheets). It makes the evening go a bit smoother, especially during the synthesis portion of the meeting.

During the Workshop. Workshop staff have three primary tasks: 1) keep track of time; 2) answer questions; and 3) encourage participants. Workshop staff provide logistical support and encouragement. You will spend most of your time moving from group to group to see how they are doing. If a group looks like they are struggling with a subject, spend some time drawing out responses and helping them to formulate their ideas. Do not lock on to one group. You need to be seen as equally

engaged with all of the groups. On the group “priorities” sheet, which they pick up and carry with them from station to station, ask each group to write down the three ideas they think are the most important for each issue.

The “top three goals” or “top three issues” handout is optional, but it does simplify the synthesis portion of the workshop.

Resources:

Top Three Goals
Worksheet

Bringing “It” Together. The last section of the workshop focuses on synthesis, on bring the participants together in order to evaluate the ideas in each subject area. After the different groups have taped the clusters from their table on the wall, ask them to spend 10 minutes ranking their top three issues (top 3 worksheet). When they have finished, start at one end and ask each group what they considered to be the number one issue or goal. The chances are that there will be some variation in responses. On each issue, ask two to three groups why they chose that particular goal rather than another.

The synthesis section of the workshop is meant to do three things: 1) to encourage the participants to think about why they made the decisions they made; 2) to encourage dialogue between the different groups; and 3) to help clarify why participants chose one goal over another. In addition, the final activity gives citizens a chance to see the full results of their work, and it gives you a chance to tie the work and bring the citizens together.

Wrapping up the Workshop. Before you cut the participants loose for the remainder of the day, spend a few minutes talking about “where do we go from here” (how the materials they created will be used in the process) and any upcoming meetings. After three to five hours, most of your participants are more than ready to go, so be brief. Make sure each participant has an “upcoming events” handout, so they can add future workshops or meetings to their calendars.

Workshop Results. After the workshop has concluded, the clustering results will need to be typed up, typically in the form of a bulleted list, and published so that non-participants can see the results. It is important for participants to see their ideas accurately represented and for the broader community to see what their fellow citizens generated. Be sure to include a brief explanation of how the information is being used, so citizens know how their work will impact and influence the final plan.

Checking it at the Door

A caveat that appears in nearly all of the articles in this issue, but is worth repeating again: if you are seeking public input, check your own biases and ideas at the door. If you are passionate about an issue, setting aside your own views can be difficult, but if you want to find out what others think, you need to let them have their views and their say. Public input sessions are not the best place for either argument or persuasion. If there are issues that need to be addressed, there are other forums that are more appropriate, including on the op-ed page of your local paper, public information meetings, and in information handouts and newsletters. You may discover that others share your views, but at the very least, the public input sessions can tell you where you may need to focus public education efforts in the future.

Variations on the Theme

While the clustering project is fairly low-tech, there are high tech versions which work well with smaller groups, including community focus groups. Programs like CMap (*The Community Planner, Spring 2011*) are available for little or no cost and can be used to develop subject clusters and concept map, using a computer and projector. Given the time lag with typing, however, the electronic approach is not effective in large groups and tends to be cumbersome.

Online Resources:

[IHMC](#)
[CMapTools](#)