A Ranking Question for a Needs Assessment

Following Bernard Jones' talk on *Changes Extension Must Make to Survive and Thrive*, agents at the All-College Conference in November asked for direction in designing needs assessments. Here's a central idea.

A needs assessment is a process. A key step in that process is finding out what citizens or their representatives view as the most serious problems facing them or other citizens in the county. Often a list of problems is generated and the final task given to citizens is to rank the problems in a survey or interview using numbers; for instance, from 1 to 12.
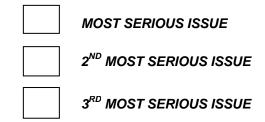
Research has demonstrated that ranking can have serious flaws that affect the quality of data (Dillman, 1978). Below are ways to eliminate some of these flaws.

What is the *basic* problem with ranking? When ranking more than three items, researchers have found that after the first three items, people cannot rank the rest of the items reliably, that is, if you ask people to repeat the ranking of items four and above, more than likely they will not rank those items the same way they did the first time.

To avoid that flaw, ask respondents to select the three most serious problems. To increase reliability further, provide boxes at the *bottom* of the question into which respondents can put the letter of the problem according to its seriousness. (With a check off version, people often put a number on the *wrong* line.) Here is a sample question:

Listed below are public issues recently identified in our county. Rank the three most serious issues facing our county by placing the letter of the most serious in box 1, the second most serious in box 2, and the third most serious in box 3.

A. *ALTERNATE ROUTE AROUND URBAN AREA*
B. *OPEN SPACE AND AGRICULTURE PRESERVATION*
C. *HISTORIC PRESERVATION*
D. *NEW TOURISM ATTRACTIONS*
E. *PARK AND TRAIL DEVELOPMENT*
F. *PUBLIC TOILETS IN GETTYSBURG*
G. *IMPROVED WATER, WASTE DISPOSAL, AND SEWER SYSTEMS*
H. *RECYCLING*

☐ *MOST SERIOUS ISSUE*

☐ *2ND MOST SERIOUS ISSUE*

☐ *3RD MOST SERIOUS ISSUE*

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu