

G4040-03



**A program for
community assessment
and improvement**

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About the First Impressions program

The First Impressions program was developed to help communities learn about existing strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of the first-time visitor. The program provides a structured opportunity to learn about strengths and weaknesses of similar communities. Results from a First Impressions visit can serve as the basis for community action, and as a way to document changes in the community over time.

Volunteers from two similar communities (size, location, county seat, etc.) agree to do unannounced visits and then report on their findings. Participants become “secret shoppers” for the day to discover what they can about a similar community or neighborhood. They follow procedures and document their visit using a Participant Guide or an online version of the guide to upload photos and comments. The guide, which ensures that evaluations and reports are thorough and uniform, requires minimal training.

First developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider in 1991, First Impressions has gone through several revisions that integrate questions about timely and relevant emerging issues faced by communities. Since its inception, hundreds of communities across the U.S. and Canada have found value in the program.

All communities have difficulties viewing their surroundings as others (customers, visitors, potential residents, and businesses) see them. Our views are skewed by over-familiarization, lack of differing perspectives and expectations, and reluctance to be completely honest with our neighbors when dealing with difficult issues, such as the appearance of buildings, customer service, and maintenance of public facilities.

The issue

First Impressions offers an effective and fun way to determine how visitors perceive communities. Each community needs an accurate and honest picture of the present before it can visualize the future. Community members can

also benefit from learning about the successes and failures of similar communities. First Impressions provides that unbiased and unique perspective.

The program utilizes community volunteers for several reasons:

- Residents learn something by visiting other communities and will be more likely to engage in the process of improving their own community.
- The program is affordable for any small community or neighborhood.
- Constructive criticism from peers is often more readily accepted than criticism from “experts.”
- The goal is to measure the perceptions of the average visitor.

First Impressions materials

It has now been more than two decades since the program began. Today, communities face new challenges, and technologies have provided opportunities to streamline the process of collecting team comments and photos. The Community First Impressions Participant Guide (G4040-01) was updated in 2014 to reflect these changes. In addition, a new Neighborhood First Impressions Participant Guide (G4040-02) was developed as a simplified version of the original, tailored to very small places or urban neighborhoods. Communities can access the 8 ½- x 11-inch paper version of both publications at no cost and at any time by downloading a PDF directly from the University of Wisconsin-Extension [Learning Store](#) (where booklet-sized printed versions may be ordered for a small per-unit charge as well).

A mobile-device friendly online version of the survey allows participants to easily upload photos or text and provides a streamlined method for coordinators to compile data. Inquire with the Center for Community and Economic Development for availability of the online survey. Supplemental training and orientation materials, including PowerPoint slides and online videos, are also available on request. To read more about the program or access materials, visit the [First Impressions](#) program webpage.

Evaluating a community’s readiness to participate in the program

Level of commitment

A community that is most likely to be ready for this program is able to recruit a team of five to six volunteers to commit a day to conduct a community visit and another half day to plan and conduct a community meeting to discuss the results. First Impressions is a good starting point for communities that sense they need to address issues influencing the community’s ability to attract visitors, potential businesses, and future residents. First Impressions is also an excellent tool for communities that have done an extensive, objective analysis of the community but lack an external or subjective evaluation (i.e., some type of community economic analysis involving data analysis and comparisons with comparable communities).

Follow-up

Conducting a First Impressions visit will have little impact unless some thought is given to how the results will be shared with the broader community. While there are numerous ways to do this, sharing results at community meetings as well as organizing informal discussions of the two teams have been effective. This typically means sharing what the team saw in the community they visited as well as the impressions of the visiting team. This can be done as a presentation with images that illustrate observations made in the final report. This is best followed up with some type of action planning—getting groups of individuals to commit time to address specific issues raised in the report.

Visit coordinator

Someone has to be willing and available to organize the exchange, pursue a willing community, orient the visitation team, and make sure the final report is compiled, delivered, and presented by an agreed-upon date.

Accepting constructive criticism

First Impressions provides a community with an honest appraisal of their community as seen through the eyes of a visitor. This means the final report will offer a fair amount of constructive criticism—along with praise. A community that has already received criticism from the community members, leaders, or media may not be ready for a First Impressions visit.

Getting a commitment from your community

If you think First Impressions would be a good fit for your community, you may still need to generate community support for the idea. You can find marketing materials, including some short videos and a sample PowerPoint presentation with an overview of the program, on the [First Impressions](#) program website.

Responsibilities of the visit coordinator

Realistically, the coordinator's time commitment will be about three days. You will need to:

- Recruit a community or neighborhood willing to an exchange visit with you. Use the commitment form found at the end of this guide to solidify a commitment to a time line for completing the exchange.
- Recruit a team of five to six volunteers from your community who are willing to conduct a visit.
- Provide a brief orientation for your team members.
- Participate in the community visit.
- Collect comments and photos from team members—recorded in the Participant Guide or via the online survey—and compile the final report. A report template is available on the [First Impressions](#) website.
- Coordinate a community event where you can share the final report with your community and begin planning for action. You also will need to present the findings of your report to the community that you visit. This is typically done at a community meeting using a

PowerPoint presentation with key photos and comments. You could choose to present your findings to the other community, or agree to each handle the local presentation. If you choose, you can clarify this role using the commitment form found in this guide. Obviously, a visiting team member would have an easier time interpreting the comments in the final report. Don't forget to publicize your event through media releases and invitations.

How to arrange a First Impressions visit

Download a copy of the Participant Guide and Coordinator Guide to answer questions as you organize your own programs. All of the print materials you will need are available free of charge on the [Learning Store](#) as electronic downloads. Printed copies of the participant guides can also be ordered for a small per-piece cost.

Communities may use these materials free of charge but are asked to send a copy of final reports to the Center for Community and Economic Development. All reports will be posted on the [Center for Community and Economic Development](#) website. Send the final reports electronically, if possible; print copies are also acceptable.

If you are seeking more in-depth training or technical assistance, please contact the UW-Extension [Center for Community and Economic Development](#) for availability and pricing options.

If you need help in identifying a community with comparable characteristics, consider contacting your UW-Extension county office, local economic development corporation, chamber of commerce, main street coordinator, or business improvement district manager to request assistance. You should select a community or neighborhood that is far enough away so your team won't be totally familiar with it, but close enough to make this a one-day trip. (Overnight trips can be great too, but not everyone can spare the time.) Remember, there are no perfect matches, just similar ones. Think about some of the characteristics that

impact your community when making a selection:

- County seat or location of state government
- Miles from a major Interstate
- Miles from a major urban area
- Unique geological or natural feature (river, mountain range, lakes)
- Population and demographics
- Major industries, employers
- Issues that are currently impacting your community (such as a road by-pass)

Selecting your team

You will need to recruit five to six people from your community who are willing to commit a day to conducting a community visit. Plan to carpool and make the visit together as a group. It makes for a more enjoyable experience and helps to ensure a better result. Be clear about your expectations when recruiting volunteers:

- You are asking them to commit a day to conduct the visit. Tell them where you will be going and the approximate timeframe for completing the visit as a team.
- You expect them to keep detailed notes in a guide provided to them or use the online survey. Their comments will be collected at the end of the day and will provide the content for the final report. Participants should plan to bring along a smart phone (for taking photos and uploading them to the online survey) or a digital camera.
- Be clear about who will be responsible for providing transportation. If you expect volunteers to pay for their own gas, meals and purchases, communicate this. Obviously, it is easier to recruit volunteers if out-of-pocket expenses are covered. Some communities have taken this a step further: if you can find a community sponsor, consider providing a small amount of cash for shopping to facilitate visiting businesses. Purchases might actually be offered as prizes to the businesses in either community that receive high customer service reviews.

Prizes could be handed out at the community presentation, where you will share the results of your report with the community.

- Try for as much diversity in your visit team as possible. Consider age, occupation, sex, income, marital status, race/ethnicity, physical ability, and the number of years as a community resident. If possible, try to include a youth member.

Encourage participants to approach the visit with an open mind and a willingness to interact with people of all races and ethnicities (Hispanic/Latino, etc.), abilities (wheelchair access, deaf/blind), religions, sexual orientations (LGBT individuals/families), or marital statuses (single, married, divorced). If participants on your team express reluctance about this, consider how their reluctance might affect the results of your visit. While comprehensive diversity and inclusion training is not within the scope of the First Impression materials, consider integrating it into your orientation.

Orientation

Remember, while “expert” opinions may be beneficial, each person’s opinion is valid and important. We strongly recommend the team get together in advance to review the Participant Guide, ask questions, and discuss information materials received from the community (see “Prior to your visit”). Organize your team to meet over coffee and provide an overview of how the visit will be conducted. Clarify who will be requesting information from the community ahead of time and compiling the final report (this is likely to be the visit coordinator), and identify a volunteer willing to make a public presentation of your report to the community you will be visiting.

It is also important during your orientation to allow participants to discuss fears or concerns that they may have during their visit. Some of these may be based on either realistic or unrealistic perceptions about the partner community. If members express concerns about personal safety, consider contacting the visit coordinator of the other team to determine if there are areas or locations that should be avoided.

Provide some instructions on how team members are to record their thoughts and observations. Tips:

- The visit will result in better information if residents do not know you are there to assess the community.
- Try to discover ways in which your partner community shines, while not ignoring the “warts.” Feel free to record additional community strengths and weaknesses not included in the guide.
- You can appear to be shopping, conducting business, or making a social visit. Strike up casual conversations with residents and be interactive.
- Be observant and take your role seriously—sincere feedback is very valuable.
- Be sure to include details and comments, as they will be the most useful feedback for your partner community.
- Decide who will be taking pictures during the visit. Multiple cameras would be helpful.
- Remember to have fun.

Role-playing

Because you want to gauge how visitors are received in the community, you may need to do some role-playing. This requires getting your story straight:

- If you are just passing through, where are you from and where are you going?
- If you are playing the role of a businessperson, what kind of a business do you run and where are you from?
- If you are a retiree, what is it you used to do and where are you from?
- Do you have a youth member on the team? Whose son or daughter is this?

Integrating training into your First Impressions program

The First Impressions program offers opportunities for integrating broader training for your team about community place-making principles, diversity and inclusion, the effects of demographic

changes, and many other community and economic development topics. Some communities have provided more substantive education for their teams on these topics either prior to or after their visits. For instance, understanding why the appearance or availability of housing is important may help your team understand why it is included in the visit. Team members will be more open to integrating the results of the visit into local plans and actions.

Prior to your visit

If you were thinking about moving to a new community, visiting a community as a tourist or doing business in that community, what would you likely do before visiting? Request information from the appropriate organizations prior to your visit through a direct mail request, phone call or web search. Consider searching social media sites like Facebook and Twitter and consumer review sites like Yelp. You might consider calling the village/city hall, the chamber of commerce, economic development corporation, as well as some of the state agencies that should be able to provide contact information. In Wisconsin, consider contacting the [Wisconsin Department of Tourism](#) (1-800-432-8747) and the [Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation regional account manager](#). Similar state agencies should exist in the other states. This task should be assigned to at least one tech-savvy member of the volunteer visitation team. This information will assist you with your visit. If you are visiting a larger community, you may want to divide up some of the visits between team members.

The visit

Plan to arrive in the community in the morning. Team members can review the guide during the trip and reconfirm who will be “team mates” for the visit. Think about dividing into a driving team and walking team and reversing the roles in the middle of the visit. Decide who will target the various stops in town: more than one team can visit, but be sure to cover all of the “community indicators” in the guide. Participants may choose to develop a story to explain your visit. This is like the “secret shopper” concept—you

don't want to be treated any differently than a real visitor. You might consider being a person trying to locate property in the area, interviewing for a job in a neighboring community, or just traveling through and decided to explore.

Consider asking the following questions:

- *I'm on my way to a conference and have not been here before. What is there to do for recreation?*
- *Are there any good restaurants? Where would be a good place for lunch?*
- *I might bring my family here on our way to a wedding next month. Are there any good places to stay?*
- *I am considering moving to the area. Are the schools good here? Where is the best place to look for housing? What are some of the best reasons to live in this neighborhood?*
- *Where can I get information on commercial/retail space to buy or lease in this community?*

The report

Once you have finished the visit, you will need to complete a single composite report summarizing the comments from your entire team with photos from the visit. Each member of the visitation team should complete their report—preferably on the day of the visit or using the online tool—and return their responses to the visit coordinator by the date promised in the commitment form. These guides with comments from team members will serve as the basis for the summary report. Coach your team to avoid “yes/no” answers and instead provide descriptive suggestions and constructive criticism. Photos from team members will also need to be collected.

The final report should include a cover letter that provides a profile of your visitation team, the weather on the day of your visit, the date the visit took place, the amount of time spent in the community, a general summary of the visit, a thank you for participating in the exchange, and contact information of your group coordinator.

As soon as you receive the final report from the other community and after you have sent your final report to the

exchange community and set a date for a community meeting, you should then make copies and distribute them in the following order:

- Visit coordinator
- City/Village officials
- Media
- General public

Remember to send a copy of your final report to the Center for Community and Economic Development.

Community action: Conducting a community meeting

While we hope you had fun on your visit and learned something about how you might improve your community, this exercise only becomes meaningful if you begin to act upon what you have learned.

We would urge you to host a community meeting or public forum to share what was learned. This public forum is an opportunity to reflect on the final report received from the exchange community and the lessons you may have learned from your visit. It also enables you to begin to focus on whether or not there are any actions that could be taken to address potential problems in the community.

This forum would be most useful if you combine slides (images from the community) with comments from the final report. If you selected to coordinate this program locally, each coordinator (or a volunteer from the visit team) will have to agree to make a public presentation to the community they visited (or agree to do that themselves based on the final report and images from the other visitation team). The Extension Service in Illinois has actually coordinated some regional forums in which multiple communities shared their experiences and findings.

In preparation for this public meeting, you should plan on having copies of the final report available along with news releases and photos for the media (don't forget to extend an invitation to the media!). Your committee should review the final report prior to the meeting and prepare a list of points that could be

addressed by some form of community action.

Possible agenda

1. Welcome and introduction to the First Impressions program (who, what, when, where, and how).
2. Distribution of final report from the exchange community (make note of the availability of press releases for the media).
3. Review of major points found in the final report. These points should be covered along with images from the community. (This list should be formulated with input from the group of volunteers who participated in the visit. You might want to have this list as a handout.)
4. Review of things learned from the community visit (what did you see and learn from your visit to the other community?).
5. Action planning session. Break up into small groups to begin addressing some of the issues found in the final report. If you are interested in a template for beginning to think about addressing issues, consider using the action plan template.

Action plans

Use the following format to begin formulating an action plan that would address a deficiency or build upon an asset that was identified in your final report.

Comment/Suggestion	Done?	Needs Improvement?		
		None/NA	Some	Much
1. Consider additional park facilities				

Take some time to analyze the major recommendations, suggestions, and comments. In this example, perhaps you have park facilities, but the visitation team was unable to locate them. In this instance, you might want to consider changing the indicator to read, "Provide more information and directional signs for the community park facilities." If the group agrees that more park facilities are needed, the action planning process might proceed as outlined below.

Issue: The community lacks public park facilities

Task	Time Line	Who	Will Do What	Evaluation Measure
Task #1	7 days	Jim (Chamber of Commerce President)	Will call the City Parks Committee chair to explore plans for park improvements	Call made within the week
Task #2	30 days	Jim and interested citizens	Meet with the Parks Committee to explore plans or lack of plans for park expansion	Participation in Parks Committee meeting
Task #3	90 days	Jim and interested citizens	Begin to explore recreational needs assessments that have already been done (i.e., formal recreation plans conducted by the community or local planning agency)	Reports reviewed
Task #4	3 months	Parks Committee	Conduct additional recreational needs assessment survey in the community if needed	Survey completed
Task #5	6 months	Parks Committee	Determine costs of resources and/or public access locations	Estimates developed
Task #6	9 months	Parks Committee	Investigate potential funding sources and funding alternatives	Alternative funding sources investigated
Task #7	12 months	Parks Committee	Recommendations for park improvements	Recommendations are forwarded

6. Establish a follow-up meeting date to track progress.
7. Report results from the meeting to the local media and invite additional public participation in the solutions.
8. Consider additional educational programs that might address some of the deficiencies or assets identified as a result of the First Impressions program. Topics might include: customer service, downtown business improvement districts, the Main Street program, building organizational capacity within existing community-based organizations (economic development corporations, chambers of commerce, civic groups), or a community economic analysis program that would provide some objective analysis of the community and complement the subjective feedback from the First Impressions visit.

First Impressions Commitment Form

_____ and _____ have partnered to conduct a First Impressions Community Exchange.

First Impressions program purpose

The purpose of the First Impressions (FI) Community Exchange is to help _____ and _____ learn about their strengths and shortcomings through the eyes of first-time visitors. FI is a structured community assessment program that enables communities to learn about the first impression they convey to outsiders. It offers a fresh perspective on the appearance, services, and infrastructure of each community. Volunteer teams from _____ and _____ will undertake unannounced, one-day visits, record their observations, and give constructive feedback to the exchange community. The knowledge gained through this program is intended to serve as a basis for community action.

First Impressions program expectations

_____ and _____ will:

- ✓ Identify a coordinator to plan the FI visit.
- ✓ Recruit volunteers for the visiting team from the community and make arrangements for the team to travel to visit and complete an assessment of the community within the agreed-upon timeframe.
- ✓ Prepare a written report (using the comments from the Participant Guide and incorporated into the report template) and slide presentation on the visiting team's observations during the visit and present the report at a public meeting in the exchange community within the agreed-upon timeframe.
- ✓ Host a public meeting within the agreed-upon timeframe, when the exchange community will present their report.
- ✓ Develop an action plan based on the report by the visiting team from the exchange community.

First Impressions roles and responsibilities

_____ and _____ will identify a coordinator for each of their respective FI Community projects.

The coordinator, working with the team members of the sponsoring organization will:

- Coordinate the visit with the exchange community (timeframe, budget, etc.).
- Recruit volunteers for the visiting team, ensuring an appropriate mix of team members in terms of skills, profession, age, gender, etc.
- Organize the trip to the exchange community.
- Collect completed Participant Guides with comments/notes.
- Facilitate the preparation of a written report for the exchange community.
- Prepare a slide presentation featuring the highlights of the report.
- Present the report at a public meeting in the partner community.
- Host a report-back meeting to hear the exchange community's report.
- Coordinate a media communications plan and identify a media spokesperson, if necessary.

Visiting team members will:

- Attend training/orientation meeting(s) in preparation for the visit.
- Review the Participant Guide prior to the visit.
- Complete the Participant Guide during the visit.
- Participate in the preparation of a written report for the exchange community.
- If selected, present the team's findings to the exchange community at an agreed-upon time.

Timing and format

The visits will occur within the month of _____ 20__.

Report-back meetings will take place within the month of _____ 20__.

Visits will follow a one-day format and be conducted during a weekday.

Program costs

Program costs may include the travel expenses for visiting team members, meeting room rental, report preparation, and any remuneration for volunteer or staff time. _____ will cover their own costs to visit _____ while _____ will cover their own costs to visit _____.

Final reporting

Once the visits have been completed, the visiting team will prepare a written report for the community they visited.

The written report will be completed within 4 to 6 weeks upon completion of the community visits. This report will include a cover letter that provides a profile of the visiting team roles/perspectives taken, the date the visit took place, the amount of time spent in the community, a general summary of the visit, a summary report, explanation of visiting team member observations, photos, and contact information.

Presentation

The _____ and _____ First Impressions coordinators and/or their designates will prepare and make a slide presentation covering the highlights of the First Impressions assessment. This presentation will take place in a public forum in the exchange community. Each coordinator will be responsible for planning and hosting the presentation by the exchange community representatives. Every effort will be made to ensure that the presentation is well attended, including participation by key community leaders, if possible.

Media

_____ and _____ will jointly develop a media communications plan and press release(s) for the project. A copy of the written report will be provided to the exchange community coordinator prior to any communication about the report contents with the media.

Agreed to this day of _____, 20__ FOR (name of community or organization) _____.

(name) _____

(position, organization) _____

FOR (name of community or organization) _____.

(name) _____

(position, organization) _____

Communities that inform us of their participation will be added to the following map with a link to the report if you archive it on-line or send us a copy:

[Google Map showing location of participating First Impressions Communities.](#)

These reports provide a valuable measuring stick for how the community is doing over time.

The UW-Extension First Impressions program was developed by Andrew Lewis and James Schneider in 1991 and revised by Andrew Lewis in 2002 and 2007. Laura Brown further revised the program in 2014. In addition, Laura Dombrock, Amy Greil, Lisa McKinnon, Jay Moynihan, Victoria Solomon, Beverly Stencel, Diana Tscheschlok, Ann Weid, Ingrid West, and Kristine Zaballos provided valuable input.

Questions about the program should be directed to:

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Madison, WI 53703

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FAX: (608) 263-4999
TTY: 1-800-947-3529
Email: cced@uwex.edu

This program is offered by the University of Wisconsin-Extension as a free resource with two basic stipulations: send copies of the final report and credit the University of Wisconsin-Extension. Copies of the report should be sent to the address above.

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