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C.A.R.R.O.T. / G.A.R.D.E.N.S.: Communities About Resource Responsibility Of Tomorrow Growing A Resource Dense Environment in Schools

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C.A.R.R.O.T. / G.A.R.D.E.N.S.:
Communities About Resource Responsibility Of Tomorrow
Growing A Resource Dense Environment in Schools

Auhors: Joel Cambell, Jessica Dake, Breanna Dubanik, and Marisha Ibrahim

Abstract

Tackling the issue of getting healthier food options into the hands of children presents multiple barriers. For example, with almost one out of three items on the supermarket shelf coming from a genetically modified organism, with school lunches decreasing in nutrition, and with the U.S. Environmental protection agency allowing nearly 1,400 pesticides to be spread throughout our nation, 40 of which have been classified as carcinogens (Epstein, M.D., and Leibson 28-33), this task is becoming progressively more difficult. In order to slow this vicious trend, we propose the long-term goal of creating blueprints for a large community event targeting the children and parents of urban communities. These blueprints are intended to enable any interested party to host their own community event focused on engaging children and parents. These events would bring knowledge and awareness of a variety of different healthy-living and sustainability topics such as the benefits of eating fresh, local food and the ‘how-to’s’ of gardening. In order to achieve this goal, we must begin small; to gather data and learn what is needed as we progress further. Targeting the population that attends the various Farmers’ Markets across Grand Rapids, MI will help to involve our ultimate target audience, the children. However, to ensure that children continue forward with a more healthy and sustainable lifestyle, we must target current and future parents. Our goal is to encourage change not only in our homes, but in children’s schools as well.

Introduction

Everywhere we look, everywhere we go, and in anything we do we are accustomed to facing and solving problems, but what if we came across a problem so complex it seemed impossible to solve? Then we have found a “wicked problem”. A wicked problem is an interconnected web of issues that cannot be solved by any one solution (Fauvel lecture 2013). Wicked problems deceive by leading every simple solution down a path of problems more wicked than the one before (Fauvel lecture 2013). There are many wicked problems in our society today, and it takes many disciplines as well as community members working together to start to chip away at the massive problems at hand. Brown states that the only appropriate way to solve wicked problems is to come together and include the contributions of individual, community, specialized, organizational, and holistic knowledge (Brown 2010). Only then will the entanglement of problems start to unravel towards a remedy.

We, a group of 12 students from Grand Valley State University, are in the first ever “Wicked Problems of Sustainability” class, and we are on a mission to unravel a very wicked problem. The wicked problem our class is working on deals with food. The issue we were given to tackle was framed through the following question: “How do we get healthy food in the hands of schoolchildren and how do we change their behavior towards healthy foods?” Schools everywhere, like GVSU Charter schools, are trying to provide their students with the best possible nutrition at the most reasonable cost. The problem, especially in a set-budget charter school, is having sufficient funding. The majority of these schools are located in inner cities, where 69% of kids qualify for free or reduced lunch and breakfast (Kimball lecture 2013). The increase of nutritious

foods in schools might come with a greater price, and unfortunately the charter schools cannot bond for more money. This means they must use the money dictated to them by the government, and that amount of money is not enough to supply the big changes that are being mandated by The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (Kimball lecture 2013). And even if these schools found the funding they needed, they do not have sufficient kitchens to enable the staff to cook fresh meals for the students. Furthermore, if these schools had the funding and the necessary kitchen supplies, the schools would then have to get the students to care about and want to eat healthy food. Given the above conditions, this problem is clearly wicked.

Wicked problems related to food are extraordinarily complex. There are many questions surrounding this issue including, what is the root of the problem? The increasing population growth throughout the world caused factorization in our farming industry with the aim of meeting the increasing demand for food. An alarming study done by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development states that “agricultural production will need to increase by 60% over the next 40 years in order to meet the rising demand for food” (Epstein et al 2013). This situation has led us in large part to the wicked problem we face today, where children are living on highly processed foods which are high in processed simple sugars, and tricking the genetic evolutionary preference for sweet tastes are trained to crave these non-nutritious foods. We live in a society where 60% of the items found on supermarkets shelves have genetically modified ingredients, and the U.S. Environmental protection agency has allowed nearly 1,400 pesticides to be spread throughout our nation, 40 of which have been classified as carcinogens (Epstein et al., 2013). The exposure to these chemicals is a scary epidemic that is leading to a wide range

of cancers, including brain, central nervous system, colon, lung, breast, ovarian, pancreatic, kidney, testicular and stomach cancers (Epstein et al., 2013).

On top of this, there is a very serious lack of connection to our own food. These days, many U.S. children tend to grow up thinking their food comes from cans and boxes. In truth, many do not realize the hard, dirty, and rewarding work associated with growing the food that they eat. Without this connection with nature and our food, people are unlikely to make the changes necessary for a more sustainable and healthy food lifestyle. Moreover, this exposure increases the likelihood of obesity. These possible sources to the proposed issue further lead us to ponder the relationship between food and human beings.

Luckily, the trends are changing. Families are starting to realize they need to buy and eat more locally grown food, and people are starting to want to eat according to the seasons again. In fact, there are now more than 6,000 farmers markets nationwide, which is a 250% increase since 1994 (Bittman, 2011). This is a very important trend, because the growing diversity of edibles in our gardens and on our plates will improve personal health as well as the health of our planet (Nierenburg, 2013). Our planet is an ecosystem that thrives on the diversity of its flora and fauna. As a nation, we are starting to remember how important our food is. The ideas are simple, but the setup and dedication seems like a lot of work. We want to show the community how cost-effective and simple it is to create their own gardens; then, we want to demonstrate the improvements that they can create with their re-discovered love of food. The revolution has already been started; we just need to feed the fire. We want to get the community involved, and teach them how it feels to be empowered by food.

Research Question

We often hear the media refer to advertisers as companies trying to sell an experience, but deliver a brand. A soda commercial is designed to show happy people having fun, with the source being the product. Buy the product and become happier. While this is effective, it is reducing human intelligence to a series of Skinnerian responses. Instead, we aim to get the members of the community involved in the process so the lessons of eating healthy food will be inculcated, rather than just a passing attempt to sell happiness. How do we appeal to the greater cognitive potential of the community? By engaging them directly. Rather than making it something which happens to them, make it something we all do together. When discussing where to go with the semester long question we were charged with, we felt that rather than addressing the issue of school lunches, we needed to discuss the root cause of poor food habits. Our central question became: how do we get the community engaged in the production and consumption of healthy food?

We wanted to focus our target audience on not just the children, but also the parents since we know parents ultimately have a lot of control over both shaping their children's food preferences and providing them with certain foods in place of others. According to a study published in the JAMA Pediatrics Journal, "children begin to assimilate and mimic their parents' food choices at a very young age, even before they are able to fully appreciate the implications of these choices" (Sutherland, Beavers, Kupper, Bernhardt, Heatherton, Dalton, 2010). In this study 122 children were told to play the role of a shopper at the grocery store. They were given a basket and told to go shopping for food items. However, before the kids went shopping, their parents were given a questionnaire regarding their grocery store

shopping habits. Specifically regarding which items they had previously, or regularly pick up on a grocery run. There was a positive correlation between the parents and their children's unhealthy food choices versus purchased healthy food items by the end of the children's shopping experience (Sutherland et al., 2008).

Additionally, research done by Van Bueran, Klijn, and Koopenjan (2003) assisted in the direction of our proposal. They found that there are four factors that can generally explain impasses and breakthroughs in policy processes. Two of these factors briefly explain the importance of -- and reasoning behind -- our own approach: (1) social causes and (2) cognitive causes. It appears to be necessary that we become more aware of the interdependencies between stakeholders and increase our joint activities in order to foster real policy change. That is, we need to become more aware of our dependency upon one another in order to foster productive collaborative spaces for change (cognitive causes). This led us to the conclusion that we must broaden our scope and target not just children, but also parents and the community as a whole. The interdependencies of family life necessitate a more holistic approach.

Thus, taking the ideals from Slow Food Education, and our own experiences into consideration, we decided it was important to address the family as a whole. While it is important to have the children involved in their habit formations, the parents need to guide and encourage them every step of the way. While making an effort to build healthfulness and purpose to the items we put into our bodies. We need to bring people together to experience the preparation, and creativity that comes with food. This is what led to the idea of portable healthy food stations within a community event (discussed below).

Collaboration and Process

We started our process towards getting healthy food into the hands of children by discussing how to work within the confines of the education system, but we soon realized that despite efforts such as the Farm to School initiative in Michigan, there are many hoops that must be jumped through due to federal regulations. At the very least, we were quickly halted by the bureaucracy. We also realized that in order to truly reform our food system in the United States, Michigan for starters, we needed to have an honest discussion about the origin of poor nutrition in schools. It is not *the* cause; it is instead symptomatic of the sources. Our group determined that two primary sources of this wicked problem were a lack of education and an inability to obtain healthy foods by the parents/guardians of the children. Thus, instead of focusing solely on the children we resolved that a tri-tiered approach would work better. As briefly indicated above, the three groups we decided were important were the children, the parents, and the community at large. By initiating change at each of these levels we hope to change the cultural norms of food consumption rather than just handing kids a good meal at school. Our rationale was furthered by a story from the New York Times titled "No Appetite for Good-for-You School Lunches" by Vivian Yee. In the article she details how even though students were receiving healthy food, they were throwing it away (Yee, 2012). The attitude towards healthy food needs to be changed first.

This revelation really helped us to focus our efforts on outreach. We decided that the best course of action would be a two part project. The first aspect would be focused on research and collaboration with our stakeholders. We hypothesized that Grand Valley State University was likely to be a good testing ground for a small how-to

booth. This is a good initial step because it is a relatively contained and easily controllable environment. Beginning these booths at GVSU would allow for data collection of resources, such as topics of interest for further community involvement and general statistics before launching into the second part of the project: the community event.

Although this seemed to be like a good direction to go in, we were unaware of the potential problems both venues proposed. We discussed ideas such as free food, but it wasn't until one of our stakeholders, Chef Michael O'Brien, mentioned that soup samples would be the best way to go that we really began to see how the project would work out. In one sense, we had a good idea on how to successfully incorporate the community into our project, but we were also out of touch with the communities we were trying to reach. While it is certainly true that college students experience food insecurity, these experiences cannot be equated to the needs of young children who consistently go hungry. It is challenging to understand the role food insecurity plays in a young child's life and in their family's life; this insight led us to the conclusion that we had to find a way to meet and engage the community more directly. Subsequent discussions with other stakeholders impressed upon us that finding a way to make both parts of the project accessible to the community were key to our success. Thankfully, many of these individuals came to our classroom eager to give us suggestions. One such individual was Ken Freestone, creativity consultant and environmental advocate. He discussed with us that in order to get businesses and organizations excited about our event, for example, we need to provide incentives. Incentives need not be monetary, but could instead be free advertisement for their business or organization. When organizations get involved with an event, that is, it can increase their customer base and revenue.

As we finalized our plan we took to heart what our stakeholders suggested; bring it to the community level. We meshed this with our original goal of changing the way we view food as a society and came up with C.A.R.R.O.T./G.A.R.D.E.N.S. Our goal is the same, but the aim is more refined. We have a plan which, if put into action, could actually work. Since the presentation of our proposals at the GVSU Alumni house, a number of stakeholders have come forward and offered to lend their support in achieving this goal. The infrastructure is there, now we just need a movement.

Project Plan Description

From our research of existing programs, we found Slow Food Education. This organization had created a successful program called, "A Journey from Taste to Origin." Slow Food believes that "by understanding where our food comes from, how it was produced and by whom, adults and children can learn how to combine pleasure and responsibility in daily choices and appreciate the cultural and social importance of food" (A Journey to Taste from Origin). The Slow Food Education approach is different from others because "they are based on the idea that food means pleasure, culture and conviviality," and they create interest and emotion by involving all five senses (A Journey to Taste from Origin). This organization takes "hands-on" to a whole new level. One of the best things about this program is that they have everything available for anyone to use. In fact, Slow Foods Education has even sent our group a DVD explaining the process of the program. This DVD will be included for future student to learn from. From this insight, we decided that our best tactic is to reach out to the community.

We want our target audience, the children and parents, to gain knowledge of

their resources, understand the importance of healthy food, and become empowered to demand healthy nutritious food in their homes and in their schools. To do this, we propose to create a community event. We will create the blueprints for a 'How-To Community Workshop' that is intended to enable any interested party to host their own community event focused on engaging families. These events will spark an awareness of a variety of different healthy-living and sustainability topics where multiple stations are available for children and their parents to visit in order to gain helpful knowledge on living a healthier life. From the knowledge gained from Slow Food Education, we will strive to make each station as hands-on as possible to ensure fun and enjoyable learning for everyone in the community. The main aspects of this event will be focused on how-to grow a garden, how-to grow it again by way of seed saving, and how-to use what was grown by way of simple food preparation instructions.

The three fundamental aspects of this How-to Workshop will help a community create healthier living habits. This first aspect is how-to grow a garden. We have reached out to specialized urban garden architects who want to get involved in this event. These urban architects would be able to inform families on how to create a garden with the space they have available. Additionally, there are thousands of varieties of fruits and vegetables that can be planted at all different times throughout the season. With the help from these workshops, families will be able to get the greatest possible diversity and production from their gardens. We plan to set up hands-on gardening stations that allow families to gain experience in the gardening processes. We plan to have the families participate with activities that involve gardening techniques such as watering, and holistic weed and pest control. These activities will not only allow people to play

in the dirt, but it will promote awareness of the origins of their food as well. This will increase food literacy, and will teach the first steps towards sustainable living. We will also try to persuade the parents by showing them how much money can be saved by having their own garden or by utilizing the community gardens in their area.

The second fundamental aspect is how-to grow their garden again. The main focus of these stations will be to teach the community how to save the seeds from the fruits and vegetables that they have grown. This will ensure the family has seeds to replant their garden for years to come. Saving seeds is a delicate and important process that ensures the lower home food costs associated with gardening, because it cuts down on the amount of money being spent at the grocery store or farmers market. Creating a family seed vault is not only a great way to save money, but it is also a great way to keep children involved with healthy food during the garden's off-season. Another important aspect to saving seeds is that it is a preventative measure to ensure food rations in the case of a disaster. At these stations, we will have knowledgeable individuals, such as seed saving experts from Baxter's Community Center, assisting the children and parents as they learn how-to harvest and save seeds.

The third fundamental aspect to the workshop is how-to use what was grown. This aims at teaching the community the various ways to utilize the produce they have grown. Some of the topics that interested our various stakeholders are cooking, juicing, and canning. These topics can be divided into different stations run by qualified volunteers. Some of these volunteers will be of the multiple chefs and health food store representatives who are willing to participate in our event. We want to show the community how simple it is to create healthy

meals that taste good. We will most definitely have taste testing incorporated within our stations. This will allow the community members to truly use their senses and create positive emotions towards healthy food options. We hope this will encourage families to do these activities together. Preparing food as a family will help to instill healthy eating habits into the children while bringing the family closer as a whole. This pattern will begin to break some of the bad habits that many of today's families are struggling with and will eventually assist in changing the behavior of these children.

In addition to the stations previously discussed, we intend to include stations on nutritional label reading, daily values information for children and adult, and the specific health benefits of certain fruits and vegetables. Deciphering labels is an extremely important skill that will keep families safe from the many manufactured ingredients that are detrimental to their health. An important factor of living a long healthy life is being able to avoid ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup, and foods high in processed simple sugars, salts and fats, to only name a few. We want the community to be well informed and to be able to exercise their right to choose healthier food options. The overall goal is to empower the community into wanting to make changes in their home. This revolution will hopefully empower them to want to make changes in the school system as well.

To achieve these larger goals, we decided to begin on a small scale in order to gather data and to learn what is needed as we progress further. We propose that a trial-run of our booths on the Grand Valley State University Allendale campus would be a productive way to take action because the environment is familiar and easily controlled by our group. After all, these students are the parents of the future! From there, we have

decided to move on to targeting the community that attends the various Farmers' Markets across Grand Rapids, MI. This will help us to involve our ultimate target audience, the community as a whole. This idea stemmed from a suggestion given to us by Tona Ambrose of Grand Valley State University's Charter Schools Office. Many parents bring their children with them to the Farmers' Market; so we decided, and parents most likely agree, that it would be the perfect time and place to educate and occupy their children. So, we propose to use our fun and hands-on approach to teach these children what it means to be healthy and sustainable. Each week, there will be an interactive booth that demonstrates one of our already determined aspects of sustainable living. The purpose of the how-to booths at the Farmers' Market is to create awareness for our group's cause and to gain resources from interested parties. According to Wicked Problem Scholars, we have a better chance at success if we are willing to take "incremental actions that are bold enough to have the potential for errors, so that we can learn from those errors and make course corrections" (Salwasser, 2004). From these weekly booths at local Farmers' Markets, we will generate a large network of resources that will assist us in creating the blueprints for our ultimate large-scale community event which will include all tested booths.

Special Challenges

Any project addressing a wicked problem will include multiple obstacles and challenges. Throughout the semester, our group encountered numerous challenges, such as group collaboration, lack of response from stakeholders, defining the target audience, and resolving challenges.

As a group, we learned quickly that addressing the wicked problem of how to get healthier food into the hands of children and

how to change their behavior posed great difficulties. One challenge we faced was basic group collaboration coupled with bringing together multiple stakeholders and interested parties to the discussion table. As college students, we all have differing schedules and tasks to complete outside the classroom. Therefore, this poses various challenges in itself, including when and where to meet, who is going to do what, etc. It was extremely difficult to bring us all together as a group when contacting stakeholders with possible interest in participating in our event. Contacting possible stakeholders seemed like a simple task. Wrong. After sending numerous emails to health food stores, restaurants, chefs, urban architects, and organizations advocating healthy and local food, we received little responses. Discouraged, we felt as though it would be impossible to put on our community event.

Since day one, our group has struggled immensely with defining our target audience. The professors were always expressing concerns regarding how the event would benefit the children, whom are the original question's intended target audience. Moreover, each speaker that visited the class expressed the same concern, "Who is your target audience?" The initial ideas for our project targeted the children of low-income neighborhoods in Grand Rapids, who attended the chartered schools. However, after setbacks, challenges, and new ideas put forth, it seemed to outside individuals, we were confused with who the target audience was. Are you focusing on the children or the adults? This is when our group decided that in order to resolve this obstacle we needed to create a concrete argument as to why it is important to address not only the children of these communities, but their parents and future parents as well. Thus, our argument branched from the domino effect and took a

preventative approach to the wicked problem.

Future Considerations

After holding a collaborative and interactive event during which we shared our project plans with the community, we were able to collect valuable feedback from more important stakeholders. Receiving feedback from classmates, professors, various stakeholders and everyone who attended the event has allowed us to see the many areas for improvement in our project proposal that need to be considered in order to progress further. Listed below are five important future considerations:

- Building Surveys and Gathering Data
- Furthering Knowledge-Base
- Contacting Existing Organizations and Partnering
- Clearly Defining the Target Audience
- Creating Excitement

This first suggestion we have for future action-efforts involves building surveys and gathering data. Event participants mentioned giving surveys to students at the charter schools and at Grand Valley in order to see if they would be interested in participating in a small or large event revolving around healthy and local food. One individuals comment sparked several questions in our minds. How are we going to quantify our results? How will we know that we are making a difference? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed by the data gathered from the trial-runs of the how-to booths. As a group, we wanted to create a connection between the community and the community gardens and between the community gardens themselves. We were able to ask some questions and receive feedback from the professionals in our audience. These organization leaders suggested that we consider creating a

“blanket association” that would connect all of the community garden representatives and local farm organizers. This network could come in the form of a public forum that would help garden organizers gain connections to others with the same goals. This would solve the lack of communication problems between the gardens themselves; and then, they will be able to work together to further solve the lack of communication problems between their gardens and the community. Overall, we received positive feedback on our project, but the most helpful comments were the ones that revealed the problems we could not see.

Hence, the second suggestion is to further the knowledge-base. Participants of the event shared this insight as well. We need to start discussing and analyzing how the current food system works, and how and why our group proposal is addressing the structural problems of the current system. This future consideration goes hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize an individual’s strengths and weaknesses, to make individual’s feel like their opinions are valued, and to know and acknowledge our own emotions (Help Guide: A Trusted Non-Profit Resource, 2012) This is an important fact we did not address. In order to go forward with our proposal, we need to change it to suit the needs of the audience we are targeting. We as a group need to recognize what the community can do for us. We need to acknowledge community member’s opinions, thoughts and concerns, and reassure them that they are valued. Moreover, the proposal will not be viable without their assistance, since the proposal is geared towards bettering their lives in a more sustainable and healthy way. Furthermore, it is necessary that we as individuals know and acknowledge our own emotions. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and at times set

aside our biases when approaching wicked problems.

The third suggestion for future consideration is contacting existing organizations and partnering with them on various projects and events. This is one future consideration that was easily overlooked throughout our process. Instead of attempting to create a new organization or group, why not partner with one or more of the numerous existing groups already advocating for the same cause? Partnering with an existing organization will not only relieve a great amount of stress, but it saves a lot of unnecessary work. It was suggested from the presentation that we work with the various organizations in the Grand Rapids area in order to be successful with this project. For instance, Well House is a local organization represented by Camilla Voelker and Jeff Smith. They are willing to provide us with the opportunity to work with them in order to join existing events in the area. We could also utilize the volunteer efforts that could be provided by the Student Environmental Coalition, said the SEC President Bill Kinter. Mr. Ken Freestone, creativity consultant and environmental advocate, suggested that we add one of our booths to the plentiful festivals in Grand Rapids, including the Eastown Street Fair. Another idea gathered from the presentation feedback was that we could contact the schools in order to have an event that is focused directly on the children. From there, we could move on to events involving the community as a whole. This is a great way to tap into what organizations are doing and to utilize their resources. Participants also expressed the simplicity of going to where hundreds of people are, not trying to get people to come to you. The stakeholders in our project play a huge role in deciding what we will be able to bring to an event because everything that we present is dictated by what professional we have working with us.

The fourth suggestion for future consideration is to clearly define the target audience. This was a continual challenge the group faced. Even at the presentation, participants and professors still seemed somewhat confused as to whom our target audience is. It is important to remember that these children attending charter schools are part of the reduced lunch program, and they typically reside in low-income communities that face many obstacles on a daily basis when it comes to obtaining healthier food. Additionally, many of these communities in Grand Rapids and Detroit are food deserts, which are best defined as a low-income areas where a significant percentage of the population experience numerous food choice access difficulties, which negatively affects their ability to exercise healthy choices (Food Deserts, 2013). Residents of these communities are usually of minority ethnic backgrounds and are either part of the working or lower class. In the beginning of this project it seemed like these were the individuals we were targeting with our large community event, which is now considered our long-term goal. However, after talking and exchanging ideas with other individuals and experts, it seems as though we as a group lost sight of the main target population described above when developing our mobilized small event, which is the short-term goal. Targeting children, parents, and future parents who are typically middle class or higher and do not necessarily need the assistance and resources we are attempting to promote and provide. With that said, it is important to not lose sight of who the ultimate target audience is. In our case, the children, parents, and future parents residing in low-income communities.

The fifth future consideration is creating excitement. Lastly, in order for the project to be successful we need to enhance our booths by creating more excitement. This will not only be fun for children and parents,

but it will bring them together as a family and a community. Participants of the event suggested turning our booth ideas into games; because let us face it, everyone loves games. Participants also suggested enhancing our cooking booth by doing parent-cooking demonstrations by using parent's assets such as skills around ethnic foods and dishes. They can share simple recipes and demonstrate their creative dishes. Furthermore, participants suggested putting on various types of food competitions; let the kids and their parents get messy and have fun with the food.

As stated before, recognizing and acknowledging everyone's values is important if the project is to continue to the next step. Including stakeholders and partnering with existing organizations will allow for easier access to resources. It is important to remember to include as many perspectives and voices as possible in order to fully address the issue. For instance, we need to intentionally consider the issue from multiple disciplinary lenses: sociology, psychology, economics, political science, legal studies, and environmental studies to name only a few. In order to further enhance our cause and to empower the community members to decide to make changes in their homes and schools throughout the country, it is extremely important to achieve the future considerations so that real changes can be made.

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