

Winter 2014

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ScholarWorks Citation

Carlson, Michael; Macko, Andrijka; and Richter, Katie, "Fresher Start Team Project Analysis" (2014). *LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability*. 7.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wickedproblems/7>

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Fresher Start Team Project Analysis
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Winter 2014

Abstract:

In the Fall of 2013 a team of students in LIB322: “Wicked Problems of Sustainability” at Grand Valley State University created “Fresh Start,” an afterschool program centered on teaching middle school students healthy eating habits. The values and initiatives demonstrated by “Fresh Start” persuaded us – a team of LIB322 students from the Winter of 2014 – to further their initial efforts. Our team, “Fresh(er) Start,” thus sought to develop and refine an interactive afterschool program for elementary school children within the local community. Working with children while they are young is crucial to their future dietary practices. Biopsychologist Julie Mennella (2013) of the Monell Center states, “the preferences (children) form during the first years of life actually predict what they’ll eat later.” As people age, their eating habits become more difficult to adjust. If we can help children learn the importance of nutrition, they are more likely to lead healthy adult lives as well (Wartman, 2013). To this end, we suggest a twelve-week afterschool program focusing closely on the importance of healthy, sustainable living. Education through the use of interactive and collaborative lessons will help children in our community become more involved and interested in their nutrition. These lessons will cover a wide variety of subjects ranging from cooking, to gardening, as well as the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Introduction

Most problems have simple solutions. If you're tired, you sleep. If you're cold, you grab a blanket. If you can't see, you turn on a light. Other problems are not so simple; some problems are *wicked*. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973) defined a wicked problem as: "a complex issue that defies complete definition, for which there can be no final solution, since any resolution generates further issues, and where solutions are not true or false or good or bad, but the best that can be done at the time. Such problems," they say, "are not morally wicked, but diabolical in that they resist all the usual attempts to resolve them." The solutions to such problems are not so simple nor so straight-forward; thinking there are clean and simple solutions is in fact a consistent reason why our responses to wicked problems are so poor.

For instance, our current food system qualifies as a wicked problem because of the many factors and obstacles that need to be taken into account such as the current government and economic regulations, environmental policies, lobbying, advertisements, the healthcare system, public opinions, school policies, the transportation system, funding, and so much more. Looking back at the history of our food in the United States, we can see that the Nixon administration responded to high food prices by increasing food production while paying little attention to quality. America still retains these policies (Pollen, 2008). These policies give large agricultural subsidies to farmers who grow corn and soybeans, common animal feed ingredients, in order to lower the price of meat and other products of livestock. As our ability to produce these crops increased, these subsidies have

encouraged overproduction of these crops. The excess of these high calorie crops are then processed into fast food and soft drinks that we then buy and consume (Yale Rudd Center, 2013).

Valuing quantity over quality perpetuates the epidemic of obesity in the country by providing unhealthy processed foods in place of nutritious and natural foods. How do we feed everyone without sacrificing food quality? Focusing in on a narrowly self-serving agenda, the current food industry resists change as it is not profitable for them. The government finds it hard to change due to current policies having their own momentum (ie. it's easier to do nothing). Communities find it hard to change for systematic and institutional reasons such as a lack of access, low income, social stigma and time constraints (Yale Rudd Center, 2013). "Fresh(er) Start" plans to work with these communities to foster change.

"Fresh(er) Start" is a project started by three LIB 322 students in the winter of 2014 designed to tackle the wicked problem of food systems in our local community of Grand Rapids, MI. This project aims to make a positive impact on this problem by 1) educating children about the health benefits of a proper diet, as well as 2) teaching children that eating healthy food does not have to be a painful experience and 3) connecting them to local foods.

Action Plan

After our team studied the "Fresh Start" plan, we brainstormed on how to improve upon it. After pooling our ideas together, we culled from them the best and most necessary enhancements to the original project. By working in this way, we sought to collaborate across multiple peer and self-disciplines; not only did we

need to cooperate as a team, but as members of a greater cause.

The Fall 2013 “Fresh Start” team proposed a “club” be held at the GVSU Sustainable Agricultural Project (SAP) as an afterschool program for middle school children. This club focused on topics ranging from at-home gardening to how eating habits affect the environment. The club helped educate students in an interactive and fun way (Bell, Damon, Eardly, & Siemon, 2013).

Our first adjustment had to do with grade level. We want to help educate children early so that the lessons will have a greater impact on the students’ food habits. If we reach children while they are young, these good eating habits can last a lifetime, thus why we decided to focus on working with grade school students instead of middle school.

We decided that “Fresh(er) Start” should be held immediately after the children’s regular classes, eliminating transportation as an issue and becoming an inexpensive alternative to daycare. Parents won’t have to pay for transportation and the program would involve volunteer efforts. Further reduction of expenses make “Fresh(er) Start” convenient as possible and easier decision for parents to enroll their children into the program.

We also decided that the program should be a fun experience for the kids. This helps them get more involved in the program and more interested in learning (Fronville, 2009). To this end, we decided that the program should be more hands-on with not as much tedious paperwork. If we can get the kids excited about the program, their enthusiasm will help impart the importance of nutrition to their parents. If the kids go home excited about nutritious foods, the parents are likely to be satisfied with the program and

more involved in constructing a healthy diet for themselves and their children.

After putting the project plan together, we attempted to find interested stakeholders to invite to the presentation event. This appears to be where the team(s) ran into problems. The speakers invited to our presentation event were valuable sources of information. We emailed several outside stakeholders to invite to the event, but inviting more would have given us an even broader range of perspectives. There are programs that focus on teaching nutrition and, though they differ from our program in several ways, their relative similarity would’ve given us a wealth of experience, knowledge, and it would’ve been a boon to our project.

Process

The research that was conducted for the development of our new, “Fresh(er) Start” project proposal consisted of taking a look at past successes and failures of various after school programs. In conjunction with this we utilized selected readings from this semester in order to better process how to not only tackle wicked problems, but how to approach problems from various angles.

It was important to understand the vital elements that go into developing an afterschool program, so taking a comprehensive look at success stories was our first step into brainstorming possible ways to get this project to take shape. From our research, we were clearly able to see that success was driven by a direct excitement and enthusiasm from the children involved. The YMCA is one organization in particular that set the stage and provided our team with a helpful guide through the nutrition-based programs they offer for children and their families. Their afterschool programs

occur at 40 different locations in the Grand Rapids region and focus directly on healthy education, food preparation, garden growing, with recipes and shopping and budgeting tips for parents (YMCA). The programs and lessons get the parents and children equally involved and excited.

Everything we discovered that was making the YMCA successful was exactly everything we essentially wanted to do in our program. They had the same goals and values that we held close to our hearts. Their work gave us inspiration and motivation to feel like we were heading in the right direction. After we were made aware of quite a few afterschool programs of this nature in the greater Grand Rapids area, we were left having to ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Was still a need for a program of this kind in the Grand Rapids area?
2. How could we construct a new afterschool program without taking away from the successes of the nutrition-based programs that already existed?
3. Or should we focus our efforts on partnering with the existing programs in place instead?

The article, “To Build, or Not to Build a Road” by Ingrid Lemon Stefanovic, led us to consider the possibility that it was not necessary to build a new afterschool program from the ground-up in order to affect change. It is also valuable to join pre-existing efforts in the same task(s) and goals. We then had to consider and identify the true needs of the community and move forward only after informed decision-making and collaboration with community partners and stakeholders occurred.

What already had started as a wicked problem became increasingly complex as we delved deeper into the issue. From our open dialogue event we were presented with many insightful suggestions and possible connections to help us along our way. We were told to contact Assistant Principal Ryan Huppert from Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) in order to gain further knowledge on the status of the nutrition-based curriculum and afterschool programs that are currently in place. Many lower income schools, such as GRPS are generally in need of assistance and supplementation so finding ways to partner and work alongside the public schools in the Grand Rapids area so getting in contact with Principal Huppert was a great lead for us.

Another helpful suggestion for moving this project forward was to contact the Department of Environmental Quality as well as Seeds of Promise—a nonprofit dedicated to enriching the lives of urban community members. Continuing to reach out the YMCA was also always on our intended agenda to see how we could go about assisting or partnering with them in order to further develop our plans for bring knowledge and excitement about the importance of sustainable living and a healthy lifestyle to the youth in our local community.

Results

“Fresh(er) Start” hasn’t been put into effect at any schools or locations during this semester, but by having the opportunity to share the revision of this idea with several stakeholders and local resources, we have been able to put the name out there. We have also received feedback on who we should contact, and who may be interested in having this program put into practice. This has also helped us see what revisions we could

make to our plan, increasing its value and viability as a resource to interested stakeholders.

A struggle that was unavoidable to us may have been our team's structure. James Buckenmyer comments that "the determinants of successful group formations are (dependent upon) location and proximity, interaction, communication, common interests, size, and all leading to consensus" with fellow team members (Buckenmyer). These necessary conditions for success are not always present.

Some of the challenges we have faced with our project (as many groups experience) is time constraints and personal schedules. The weather season we experienced posed a challenge with below freezing temperatures, harsh winds, and heavy snowfall. This not only limited us from working together in person, but contacting stakeholders and meeting with them in-person; just as we have our own lives and work, so do the potential stakeholders.

As much as we tried to look far ahead and perceive obstacles we may encounter, we still cannot avoid all that come our way. We have had several "unknowns" create pauses in our work together, and as individuals. With job and personal obligations as well as economic constraints, stress has caused tension in and out of our work environment. Such pressures have then led to adjustments of responsibility and management of time.

By the time we decided to reach out to organizations and crew members who have already established change and habits, our energy and will power to collaborate was much reduced. Being students of different background experiences and disciplines, we ourselves lacked the personal resources to bring this

project to full fruition, as certain skills and practices were required to make it so.

To help us better approach how to bring change and make progress on this issue, we looked to "Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination" by Brown, Dean, Harris, and Russell. They listed the requirements for dealing with wicked problems as such:

- Use Imagination, which is essential for uncertain issues and required to overcome the current cultural limitations on the way we think
- Be receptive to new ideas and new directions, as we need to break through the glass ceiling we have set for ourselves and our comrades; break barriers to implement collaboration
- Draw on all intellectual resources, including local opinions and those directly involved in the consequences of the 'professionals' resolution
- Value contributions from all disciplines and other ways of constructing knowledge

(Brown).

In order to fulfill these objectives, much time and dedication is required. As college students, there were many distractions that prevented us from having the full attention to make the advancements we originally planned and hoped for. But, by having a finer understanding on how to approach such wicked issues, we can now apply this knowledge to future situations.

Future Considerations

Some of the next steps that have been presented to us were to contact local schools and resources that attended our presentation event, such as the West Michigan Environmental Action Council

(WMEAC)¹ and GRPS (highlighted above). Contacting other community groups that are involved with environmental restoration and education was our most frequent suggestion, to avoid “re-inventing the wheel” by instead joining their cause(s) and becoming an extension to their work.

We were also advised to put our project in place more as a community workshop, volunteer opportunity for students in middle and high school, or an internship opportunity for college students. The Director of WMEAC, Nick Occhopinti, recommended we contact the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to further connect us with community members and groups that participate in activities and practices that our project is focused on. To better equip ourselves and our project, by joining with WMEAC we would see the process it takes to propose any insight to the DEQ and promote change(s) for the community.

Additionally, we heard from Ryan Huppert, the assistant principal at GRPS, who not only showed interest in our efforts, but the willingness to share this idea with those he believes would be interested in expanding their efforts through our project such as Seeds of Promise (SoP). “SoP promotes neighborhood transformation through collaboration with 53 Endorsing Partners, community leadership and empowerment, and performing continuous deep listening with residents to better address the needs and wants of community members” (Seeds of Promise).

We should also expand our reaches through GVSU’s Sustainable Agriculture

Project (SAP) and Farm Club to gain volunteer workers, professional assistance, and managerial guidance. The SAP is “a scientific station, where students can go to research plants, the environment, human-environmental interaction, systems thinking, and community” (2014) – the same topics our program would teach to children. By doing so, we would also be helping our fellow college students and professors as they have been working locally, combining their efforts that ring with our groups’ values and goals.

By combining this wealth of support and application, we will gain the missing piece needed to take this project beyond paper. Through WMEAC, we gain the capabilities to connect with local community members and practice change(s) through DEQ. SoP can also connect us with more community members in our local area, more so connected to the school attendees of GRPS and other within its district. We would also gain possible pupils to engage our program with, and a wide variety of concerns within the environmental and health subjects. The SAP of GVSU would give us the tools and knowledge needed to better educate and captive our youth into treating their bodies and their environment better.

We are then left with a stockpile of ingenuity that needs to be turned into a system for the people and by the people. In “Risk and Rationality” by K.S. Shrader-Frechette (1991), one line of thinking highlights the view that the public is often oppressed by the government for political gains. To help reverse this top-down decision-making approach, we need to move away from

¹ “WMEAC is a non-profit organization uniquely positioned to respond to emerging issues to natural and human ecologies by providing its

citizens a means to take action on behalf of the environment” (WMEAC).

this all too common approach, where hazards are identified, harm is estimated by an “expert,” and policy makers decide how to manage the risk for us (5).

By evaluating each of these points as individuals and forming collective insights about the matter-at-hand, we can approach wicked problems from a more comprehensive point-of-view, fight for

change, and directly influence the policies in place. We cannot alienate ourselves from outside influences, we must learn to give and take criticism, to truly collaborate across our differences, and to integrate when possible. We all need to become sustainable for a green future.

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