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Michigan Medley Project Analysis

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Michigan Medley Project Analysis

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Abstract

Team Medley was born out of Grand Valley State University's winter 2014 course, LIB 322: "Wicked Problems of Sustainability". The Michigan Medley Media Project was developed through course content, team skills, and values as well as stakeholder input. With a focus on food justice, the Team was challenged to engage with community stakeholders in order to begin the process of implementing social justice with an emphasis on food issues. Americans' disconnect with their food system has given rise to concern in areas such as overall health, and productivity, economics, environmental sustainability, as well as animal and labor rights. In order to encourage others to act upon these issues, Team Medley had a dedicated goal to provide promotional media services to organizations emphasizing food justice in the West Michigan area that work directly with vulnerable populations. Research was conducted through interviews, physical experiences, and peer reviewed studies. Making use of this information, the Team created a promotional film series for its partners, and documented the tremendous amount of work required to impact their chosen area within their communities.

Introduction

Our world is a complex place; full of institutionalized systems intended to calm the waves of chaos. These are often built with relatively little consideration for many who live and work within the system, but outside of the power structure. Such policy-making practices and institutional framing end up projecting values onto the public under the assumption that such values and policies are universally good. These systems become so embedded in daily life, that it seems difficult, or seemingly impossible to disentangle them from the ever-changing social fabric. However, this uphill battle to foster more inclusive and participatory change is not in itself an excuse for allowing such practices to continue. Team Medley believes that work centered on social justice should be pursued with a goal of acting on the constant need for the evolution of these systems.

When one of these systems fail, it is not unusual to find oneself in the midst of a crisis. Authors Can Alpaslan and Ian Mitroff (2011) argue that, “it is not enough, if it ever was, to prepare for individual crises in isolation. One must plan and prepare for the simultaneous occurrence of multiple crises or catastrophes.” (p. xvi). When this occurs, rigid institutions, and unwavering patterns of thought must be challenged in order that they do not stand in the way of the need for social change. For instance, according to Hal Salwasser (2004), “harm from inaction” can sometimes “be greater than harm from proposed action”. This is because “inaction creates ‘opportunity benefits,’” that is, the loss of benefits resulting from inaction (p. 18). As society finds itself amidst these crises, the idea of wicked problems begins

to emerge. As Valerie Brown et al. (2010) note, “patterns of thought of a previous era can create serious problems for the next” when we try to tackle wicked problems (p. 3). In truth, these problems “resist all the usual attempts to resolve them” (p. 4) and “require solutions that *challenge* the current practices of the society that generated them”. “Since responses to wicked problems involve changes in the society that generated them, solutions are only too likely to generate fresh problems.” These problems “cannot be reduced to a single causal factor or a simple solution” because there are many “inter-related causes” which “interact with multiple interests” (p. 6). That being said, it becomes apparent that many citizens, with varying knowledge and expertise are required to come to the table, in order to work together and impact these wicked problems.

The failures of the current American food system culminate in that they enable little opportunity for connection between players in the food cycle i.e.: consumers, producers and distributors. There exists a disproportionate risk among those in low-income environments, and members of socially disadvantaged populations. The need for food justice exposes itself as a wicked problem when a person’s nutrition, access to health and wellbeing, as well as knowledge and participation of healthy food systems is taken into account. Once this wicked problem had been brought to the Team’s attention, a plan of action was developed with the goal that an actual project- and not just its planning would be underway and/or complete by the end of the course.

Action Plan

As the scholarship on tackling wicked problems recommends, Team Medley began its efforts by creating a list of values and skills brought to the issues of food systems and availability (Brown, et al., 2010). These included:

- Media Creation
- Research
- Community Organizing
- Food & Social Justice
- Use Available Resources
- Build Relationships
- Attainability
- Hands-On Approach

This method ensured that any action plans born from this list would adhere to the goals set by all members. The next step was to begin brainstorming possible projects. As highlighted by Figure 1., Team members began exploring various avenues that made use of their specialized skills in film and food production. The first option involved targeting a young audience through a Bill Nye the Science Guy education format focusing on food and nutrition. Team members, however, were interested in creating a video, which sought a more diverse audience. Therefore, the idea was pursued to develop a cooking series that would be interactive and enjoyed by an entire family. The Team soon discovered a major flaw in its first two project ideas: they were top-down approaches. One of the fundamental pillars of grassroots advocacy is to work *with* the community, and not *on* them. Both projects would entail Team Medley telling the audience what to pay attention to, i.e.: what topics were meaningful and would be covered on the Bill Nye-type show, or what recipes were important enough to prepare during the Cooking Series. Finally a decision was

made to pursue the idea of Michigan Medley, a bottom-up approach involving organizations that were allowed ample opportunities to express their values and goals. As soon as the Team embraced the idea of highlighting those who *already* work towards food and social justice, a plan was put in place.

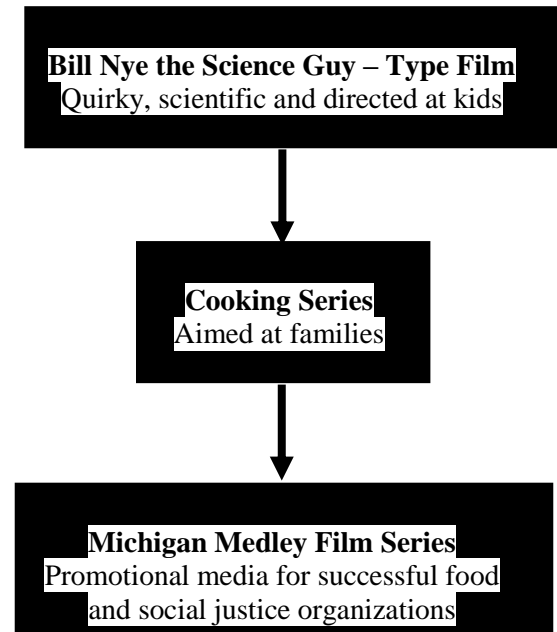


Figure 1. Evolutionary Flow Chart of Considered Projects for Team Medley.

Process

The problems with sustainability and health across our communities, state, and country are undeniable. A recent cohort study performed by Cunningham, Kramer, and Narayan following 7,738 participants from Kindergarten to 8th grade showed that of those measured, 5 year olds who were overweight at the baseline measurement were four times more likely to become obese than normal weight children (Cunningham, 2014). These findings are substantial when coupled with the results of

Ogden (2012) in 2009-2010, where 12.1% of children aged 2-5 years were obese, 18.0% of 6-11 year olds were obese, and 18.4% of 12-19 year olds were obese in the United States as measured by the CDC (obesity is defined as a BMI at or above the 95th percentile for children of the same age and sex (“Basics About Childhood Obesity,” 2012, Para. 3). Part of this unhealthy epidemic stems from food availability and options. For instance, a study performed in 23 middle schools in San Diego, CA, found that brand name ala carte sales exceeded 15,000 items per week, 27% of which are classified as fast food (Bowman, Shanthy A., et al., 2004). It is reasonable to deduce that the unhealthy eating and lifestyle habits formed in childhood only solidify with age, as one third of adults are obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, Flegal, 2014). Studies have also found that health and food consumption directly affect productivity and schoolwork. (Dani, Burrill, Demmig-Adams, 2005).

This previous finding became applicable as Team Medley took a close look at Michigan's Lakeshore County of Muskegon, and found that in 2008 the city of Muskegon had the country's highest unemployment for cities of 20,000 or more (Alexander, 2008). Pair this finding with Muskegon's recent ranking as Michigan's most unhealthy county (Alexander, 2012) that includes a 30% adult obesity rate, a 13% low-income preschool obesity rate, and a 31% poverty rate, and it becomes apparent that this community is in the midst of crises (“Muskegon”, 2013). The hardest hit area of this county is the city of Muskegon Heights where 32% of residents are unemployed, 60% of children are in poverty, and 200 vacant homes are deteriorating (“Muskegon Heights”, 2013).

With this research as well as the Team's values and skills in mind, Michigan Medley wanted to look at greater depth into how film as a teaching tool might be successful in the goal to effect change. Kotz and Story (1994) found in their studies that of the 52.5 hours of children's Saturday morning television viewed by five highly popular network stations 56.5% of all advertisements were for food, 43.6% of which advertised foods in the fats, oils, and sweet food categories. The dominance of non-nutritious advertisements led Team Medley to consider attempting to bring equilibrium to the types of food-related messages viewed by youth. This becomes increasingly important when considering Hitchings and Moynihan's (1998) findings that television advertisements influence food choice and amount of consumption.

Certainly this evidence suggests that the introduction of healthier food advertisements is a necessity, but the practicality of the Team making a realistic impact on children and adults through this sort of advertising seemed farfetched. Therefore, it was decided the most effective use of time and efforts would be through assisting established sustainability advocacy groups through promotional media services. Interestingly, a study performed by Hyun, Kim, and Lee in 2011 in regards to the restaurant industry found that positive advertising such as smiling patrons or workers induced pleasant emotional responses in viewers and affected the perceived value of patrons (2011). This positive approach directed the way the videos were planned and resulted in highlighting the efforts of individuals and organizations involved in the West Michigan area. In correlation with the findings of Hyun, Kim, and Lee, this appears to be an effective way to make an

impact on the issues of food justice.

Methods

Team Medley began by focusing on stakeholders that were easily accessible through the University or personal connection. The potential partners were approached with the attitude of: **what can we do for you** in regards to the film medium? All partners were given control of the direction of a short promotional film that would be part of the Michigan Medley film series and would be available for social media access. In the last few days of winter, their worksites were filmed and project managers interviewed. Questions were prepared in advance that were applicable to each partner's work- many of which were centered on the fundamental values of grassroots:

- Working *with* the community, not *on* them
- Empowering localized citizens and social movements
- Human health and well-being are necessary for success
- Learning from failure while striving towards success

The first community partner that Team Medley reached out to was Grand Valley State University's Food For Thought class. This was an important first step as the class had invested time in learning about what influenced a viewer's perspective of sustainability. Three students were interviewed so that their insight would help assist inquiry with future partners. The questions they were asked were:

- Where did they get their food?
- Why is being sustainable important?
- What sort of projects do you wish were out there?

Second, Grand Valley's Sustainable Agricultural Project (SAP) was contacted. Levi Gardner, the Project Manager provided valuable insight on the day-to-day tasks required when running an organization like the SAP. The volunteers' successes and failures proved that working towards social change can often throw unexpected twists into a project, and that adaptability is key to meeting long-term goals. Gardner challenged the academic notion that learning exists only within a classroom, and embraced the idea that students at Grand Valley are able to broaden their career options with the inclusion of the SAP on campus. This provides hands-on gardening experience for students who in turn will become empowered to bring these skills back to their own communities- further spreading the seeds of change in the American food system. This empowerment is crucial when working in heavily blighted areas, for instance where Team Medley's third partner has committed.

Downtown Muskegon's Community EnCompass' Executive Director, Sarah Rinsema-Sybenga, was Team Medley's third community partner. Rinsema-Sybenga was interviewed on behalf of EnCompass' numerous programs. She demonstrated a genuinely collaborative approach by speaking of how a survey had been distributed to neighborhood residents that focused on their **wants, needs, and skills** with the goal of involving as many individuals as possible in the organization's ultimate direction. The survey questions were:

- How long have you lived in the community?
- What are the things you love about this community?
- If you had a magic wand, what is

one thing you would change about this community?

- What skills, abilities, education or passions do you have to contribute to the answer you just stated in the magic wand question?
- Would you be interested in collaborating with neighbors who have similar interests?

Using this tool enables Community EnCompass to provide access to opportunity in many realms of resident's lives. Housing, laundry, tax services, youth employment, food production, and the combat of blight are all addressed in a hands-on approach. Community EnCompass has also been on the forefront of Muskegon's urban farming, and it is here that Team Medley met with the fourth partner.

McLaughlin Grows' groundbreaking farm has been growing in Muskegon's McLaughlin neighborhood where the incoming Garden Manager, Cody Yothers prepared his soil for the spring planting. As any farmer knows, spring is the time to look forward to the year's agricultural possibilities, and the same goes for a community organizer. Yothers eagerly discussed the future possibilities planned with the organization's partners. He recognized the need for the diversification of contributors within the food justice movement if solidifying change is to occur. Food is a necessity of human life, and when one's participation is cemented in healthy and sustainable habits of consumption, every aspect of their lives has the empowerment to improve.

The same values that drive McLaughlin Grows, is also found in the Team's final partner: Pioneer Resources' Food For

Thought program. This new asset to Muskegon Area Public School System provides hands-on skill sharing for high school seniors with developmental disabilities. Nutritionist and Program Director, Debra Warren's downtown classroom allows students to be out of a traditional classroom, while receiving one-on-one food education in an intimate setting. Students learn about the food cycle and all its components: composting, gardening, nutrition, shopping, food preparation, and sanitation. Not only do these provide essential life-skills to a traditionally neglected and overweight population, but also empowers them with employment skills as Food For Thought offers ServeSafe certification- the food industry's standard of quality.

The recurrent themes found in all of Team Medley's partners were no coincidence, as many of them work within similar networks. Grand Valley's "Food For Thought" students are given ample opportunity to become involved with the SAP while becoming empowered with skills and knowledge that will be brought back to their communities after their time at University. Muskegon's Community EnCompass works to not only build strong community projects such as McLaughlin Grows, but also strong community partners with organizations like Pioneer Resources' Food For Thought program. By highlighting the patterns of success: partnerships, learning from failures, working *with* the community and not *on* them, as well as skill-sharing programs, Michigan Medley has been given the tools for success. The project's film is able to shine light on what works in the West Michigan area in regards to food and social justice. Partners will be able to use these films as promotional tools in recruitment of

future participants or community partners.

Results

After the debut of Michigan Medley's first video of Grand Valley's Sustainable Agriculture Project, it became apparent that the Team's goals had been met with success. The video was presented to community partners and students who attended a Grand Valley State University LIB 322 dialogue presentation towards the end of the 2014 winter semester. The feedback was tremendous, and it became apparent to the Team that the need for highlighting social projects, that not only survive but also thrive, exists and is growing.

Michigan Medley was asked to share the first video on Facebook, Youtube, and other major networking sites that have large user bases and has the potential to be viewed throughout West Michigan, and the globe. Pioneer Resources' Food For Thought program has suggested the possibility of finding future funding for Michigan Medley in order to continue promotional film production. A Grand Rapids Public School asked that members of Team Medley present during Earth Week with the goal of inspiring young adults to choose a career path of social justice and sustainability. The connections the Team made throughout the process of Michigan Medley are not only available for future students taking LIB 322, but also for individual Team members and their career paths. This successful project provided ample insight into the process of social change for students while strengthening their bonds with their communities at large.

Note: Sustainable Agriculture Resource Project -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPkW>

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Future Considerations

The next step for Michigan Medley is to connect with interested partners who provided their contact information following the dialogue event in order to set up the planning phase of the filmmaking process. Our technological world has allowed film to become an easily accessible medium of education and motivation for social change. The videos are designed to excite and motivate people about taking action, as well as to help garner interest for those who know little about sustainability. Michigan Medley's opportunities have presented themselves in an abundant fashion. After the presentation, it was no longer necessary to reach out to potential partners. The Team was treated with confidence and trust was put in the capability of Michigan Medley to professionally promote projects or organizations.

The possibilities for future students will be outstanding. They will have a full contact list that empowers them to reach out to interested stakeholders, while collaboration with GVSU's film program will help in their endeavors. The film program has hundreds of film majors who will be eager to gain cost-free experience. Ensuring that Michigan Medley's mission is projected into the West Michigan community is an attainable goal based on the amount of partners not only willing, but wanting to work with this project. Substantial opportunities are within reach, and it is the job of all Team Medley members, current and future to take advantage of these and create real, lasting change. For future considerations, members will have contacts with the following stakeholders as well as

all past partners:

- Nicholas Occhipinti: West Michigan Environmental Action Council (WMEAC) - Policy and Community Activism Director
- Ryan Hubbard: Vice-Principal of City High/Middle and the Center for Economicology in Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Ellen Schendel - Associate Dean, Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies at GVSU

The doors of possibility of engagement with GVSU and high school students regarding Michigan Medley's vision and work have been opened. The University has encouraged the project's growth while Community EnCompass, McLaughlin Grows and Pioneer Resources have expressed willingness to work with the Team. With the edition of Muskegon's newly built farmers' market that includes a commercial kitchen, there is bound to be project expansion for the Team's Lakeshore partners. With the current booming interest in food issues, a platform exists for dialogue and the unlimited possibilities and direction for future projects.

The future of Team Medley's direction might include:

- Lecture and workshop series directed at college and high school students exploring ways to support those who are working towards social change
- Continuing the film series with current and future partners by continuingly asking, "**How can we help you?**"
- Connecting with other media sources: websites, social media,

television, etc.

As a project develops, half the battle is getting its mission into the community so that partnerships will form and work can be done. Team Medley has won this leg of the battle, and looks forward to what lies in store, as new members and their skills are embraced. The Team's success will depend on this evolution of members and their diversity so that a transdisciplinary approach will continue to flourish.

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