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Heartside's Glean Ride: Bringing Fresh Food and Ideas to the Heart of Grand Rapids

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Food Fighters | Heartside Gleaning Initiative

Team Analysis

LIB 322 – Wicked Problems

April 13, 2015

Heartside's Glean Ride: *Bringing Fresh Food and Ideas to the Heart of Grand Rapids.*

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Abstract

The Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI), a local non-profit organization, is a powerful example of place-based social justice work that fosters both sustainable and healthy living within the Heartside neighborhood of Michigan's second largest city, Grand Rapids. Since 2014 HGI has been utilizing a bottom-up approach by actively listening to its community members in order to cultivate radical change around the issue of food insecurity within the Heartside neighborhood. The Food Fighters, an interdisciplinary team of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) students enrolled in LIB322 "Wicked Problems of Sustainability" during the winter semester of 2015, were tasked to work with HGI in order to address a local "wicked" challenge project. The team put their diverse knowledge, unique skill set, and values to work in tackling the wicked problem of food waste, food insecurity, and community sustainability. Armed with both the methods for ameliorating wicked problems and with key partnerships in the local community, the Food Fighters sought to further HGI's mission to provide healthy food and education to the residents of the Heartside community, specifically designing tools to increase food distribution. Our efforts resulted in the Heartside Glean Ride mobile food cart plan as well as a brochure for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) boxes.

Introduction

With the premise that cross-disciplinary collaboration is valuable for creative innovation and ameliorative actions aimed at addressing local sustainability challenges, the members of the “Food Fighters” came to be. We are comprised of undergraduate students from across Grand Valley State University with a broad array of interdisciplinary interest and skills. For instance, team members are pursuing degrees in liberal studies, international relations, social work, and marketing. Supporting the nature of our team work, Stevanovic (2012) argues both interdisciplinary collaboration and community voice are essential for inclusive and respectful decision making processes aimed to address wicked problems. A commitment to work across our differences in our local community was the backbone of the Food Fighters research and development program. This mission was formalized through a partnership with the Heartside Gleaning Initiative (HGI).

Our community partner, HGI, collects or “gleans” excess produce from local farmer’s markets that would otherwise go to waste and redistributes these gleaned items to local food pantries, soup kitchens, and community members in the Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids, MI. Their successful partnerships with local farms have created a steady flow of produce available to the organization during its first summer season. In the 2014 season, HGI gleaned 17,291 pounds of produce from the local farmers markets (Sisson, 2015). HGI voiced strong desires to continue growing their program and developing their organization. However, delivering the food and produce to the Heartside residents in a practical and sustainable manner was a major obstacle. Thus, the idea to create Heartside’s Glean Ride: a mobile food cart that allows HGI to store and transport gleaned produce to local residents who otherwise lack reliable transportation. The Food Fighters produced an outline for the Glean Ride that was drafted to (1) allow for convenient drop off locations for produce, (2) further Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box drop off and development opportunities, and (3) provide Heartside residents without means of transportation easier access to fresh produce. The collaborative process behind and the plan for the Glean Ride creates a bottom up, mindful, and systematic approach to radically curate change for the transportation and accessibility of food and will further HGI’s work within the community, foster effective networks, and empower the Heartside residents.

The Heartside neighborhood of Grand Rapids was selected as the targeted area for the Food Fighters proposed idea, the Glean Ride. Within the Heartside neighborhood about 80% of the population is considered food insecure (Sisson, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, *food insecurity* “is limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Food security in the U.S., 2014). Heartside is home to 2,939 persons; of those 41% are living below poverty and 42.5% of the households are without a vehicle (Community Research Institute, n.d.). Due to the complexity and interdependent parts of food insecurity, it is clear that Heartside is facing a wicked issue. Wicked problems are complex, interdependent and high

stakes issues in flux. This means there can be no single, coherent definition of these problems. Since such issues can be understood in various ways and from differing perspective and sense they change over time, they tend to be troublesome and on-going. As Batie points out, “Wicked problems tend to be intractable and elusive because they are influenced by many dynamic social and political factors as well as biophysical complexities” (2008, p. 1176). Armed with the wicked problems framework and an understanding of the contextual issues HGI is facing, this team sought to develop a plan-of-action that was inclusive, comprehensive, and mindful.

Action Plan

Part I: Heartside's Glean Ride

The idea for Heartside's Glean Ride evolved through various discussions amongst team members and with Professor Lisa Sisson, director of HGI, throughout the course of the semester. The process of developing and refining our plan of action reinforced the recommendations given within the literature on wicked problems (WP); Effective efforts aimed to address wicked problems must proceed through a continuous cyclical process of defining the problem, recognizing the values at play, and locating possible temporary solutions (Norton, 2005). Particularly concerned about the problem of food insecurity and lack of transportation within the Heartside community, the team arrived at the idea of a mobile food cart. Once this initial idea was found to be of value to HGI, we worked to make it a reality. Recognizing the importance of incorporating a wide-range of others in our collaborative process, the team turned to others at Grand Valley State University and in the community. Nursing and engineering students, for example, showed an interest in the work we were doing as well as the InterDisciplinary Entrepreneurship Alliance (IDEA) student group at GVSU. The team brought these groups into the conversation and planning of the project to get more insights, feedback, and support.

One of our initial ideas was to transform a school bus into a mobile food cart. The team turned to previous models to begin to understand the process that would be involved in this transformation of a bus. Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture, located in Alexandria, Virginia, currently has a mobile market. Their mobile market became the main model for the concept of Heartside's Glean Ride. Through a freely accessible report, Arcadia provides information specifically to those seeking to create a mobile market in an impoverished and low-access community (Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food & Agriculture, 2013). Since none of the team members had prior experience with creating a mobile food cart, Arcadia's model allowed the team to understand the dynamics that go into creating a mobile food cart, ultimately illustrating this idea can be successfully implemented. Especially rewarding about Arcadia's work is how they span institutional and regional boundaries. As Arcadia has done, wicked problem scholars generally conclude we do more to share our findings since learning from our mistakes and collaborating across our differences is more likely to yield more viable and just outcomes (Norton 2005, Brown, 2010). Thus, our objectives at this point were to collaborate with the community and HGI in order to better understand their needs, assess the reality of our idea, and locate the resources to turn our plan into a reality.

Part II: Community Supported Agriculture – CSA Boxes

Focused on increasing access, HGI was also interested in designing and implementing free CSA boxes into their work. The model followed for CSA boxes came from the Good Food Box, a published manual to guide those interested in starting a CSA box program in their community. This manual was a valuable source of information since it detailed an already established, viable, and workable model describing the process for creating boxes, outlining best practices in terms of distribution, and examples of what type of CSA boxes would be most useful for different kinds of recipients.

The team sought to develop this initiative as well because CSA boxes can significantly increase access. CSA boxes, for instance, shorten the distance from farm to table in that people often forget in an industrial food system that food is grown (Biberstein & Daalderop, 2008). Education, a central goal in HGI's mission, can be expanded through the use of CSA boxes. Recipes utilizing the produce provided in the box in addition to information on the fruits and vegetables in terms of storing, preparation, and health benefits can be inserted into the boxes for use by residents. There is evidence that the insertion of such material will be of value. According to the Good Food Box, for example, 93% of their consumers reported reading the newsletter (Biberstein & Daalderop, 2008).

Working with Lisa Blackburn, the manager of Dwelling Place Apartments in the Heartside community, resident interest in CSA boxes is currently being assessed. Flyers and signup sheets were created to distribute to the residents explaining succinctly what a CSA box is (See Appendix A). At the time of publication HGI has also received a grant from Brewery Vivant (a local brewery) designed to help with the distribution of CSA boxes to local residents interested in receiving weekly produce during the growing season. Currently the grant money will be used to purchase milk crates, a reusable source for boxing the produce (L. Sisson, personal communication, April 6, 2015).

The two prongs of our action-plan, the Glean Ride and CSA boxes, are mutually reinforcing. That is, once the mobile food market is created it will allow HGI to have more accessible and reliable transportation from which to provide residents with the CSA boxes.

Next Steps

Before the team moved forward with this initial vision, we presented our findings to HGI chair Professor Sisson. Through the community partner presentation held midway through the semester, we as a team were able to identify the constraints that our idea might place on HGI. Understanding the constraints of our community partner was essential to our subsequent efforts to find alternatives that would align with the core values and assets of HGI. Our efforts to share our initial vision and, through discourse, revise our plan-of-action align with the recommendations within the research on addressing complex and interdependent challenges (Fischer, 2000). Our most exciting idea, that of a bus, had to be revised; it simply was not a viable option for HGI given the overall cost to operate and to insure, as well as the need for a

special operator's license and location for parking. Recognizing the contextual limitations under which we were working and the unviability of our vision was a turning point in our work. This moment marks our realization that stakeholders' perspectives and community input are vital to the process of transformative and sustainable change. Wicked problem scholars Valerie Brown and Judith Lambert emphasize this point in their work, saying that the "the point is not that one needs to know everything before one can act, but, to the best of one's ability, one needs to appreciate and to tolerate conflict and complexity in order to avoid solving the wrong problems precisely" (p. 133). Their own community action efforts indicate that effective local changes happen by engaging "key individuals, affected communities, specialist advisors, influential organizations, and holistic thinkers" in the planning and active phases (p. 40). Thus after engaging our stakeholders, our vision changed to that of a trailer. This new plan of action was especially valuable because our dialogue with HGI made it evident that there was a real and present need for transportation and that a trailer would more clearly and quickly meet that need.

The next steps turned to the three objectives previously laid out and locating the necessary resources. A trailer, or some resemblance of that, became the new Heartside Glean Ride, a more viable and appropriate option for HGI. A draft of what we anticipated the Glean Ride to look like was created by a team member and used to exemplify our idea to stakeholders and others interested in our work (See Appendix B). However, through meeting with Engineering Professor John Farris, we understood the Glean Ride would not be created simply based on a draft. The team, with Professor Farris' expertise, created specifications that would serve as a starting point to lay out a possible design for the Glean Ride (See Appendix C). The specifications are measurable needs stated by HGI that would be most useful to them as possible components of the Glean Ride. Through this meeting a more concrete vision for the Glean Ride was developed, making the needed resources apparent. At this point it was clear from the specifications that funding would be the biggest obstacle the project faced.

By providing HGI with a mobile food cart, HGI will be able to take their gleaned produce and distribute it more effectively to a greater number of residents. For instance, CSA boxes allow HGI to reach immobile and homebound persons who do not have the ability to easily leave their homes to make the trip to a supermarket or the local food pantries. HGI's director also noted that a large majority of residents are currently not being reached, particularly residents between the ages of 20-40 years. By bringing the produce directly to residents through the Glean Ride and CSA boxes HGI can work to alleviate the wicked issues of the Heartside community. In addition, offering onsite cooking classes at the Glean Ride stop locations has been discussed; however, incorporating a kitchen into the Glean Ride may be a potential challenge.

Process

As research on complex social problems notes "the key is to properly label the issues and find the correct tools or methods" (Salwasser, 2004). Thus, once the Food Fighters more clearly identified the issues we hoped to help address – food insecurity, poverty, and lack of mobility/transportation for many Heartside residents – the team was clear on how to focus their

efforts and where to begin research. Aside from gathering community statistics on the Heartside area the team made it a priority to reach out to residents, experts, and other stakeholders in the community, recognizing these individuals as our greatest resource for judging the potential effectiveness of our idea. Talking to community members also gave us the chance to see firsthand what kind of work was being done in Grand Rapids to alleviate the issue of food insecurity in the Heartside neighborhood.

In creating a plan the team ultimately committed to the overarching vision of Heartside's Glean Ride. To our vision, new concepts were brought in and if they were not applicable they were discarded. If a team member saw an idea as a potential benefit to the Glean Ride's functional ability (for example, adding CSA boxes or a portable kitchen) the team agreed to consider how we might incorporate it. Open-mindedness and flexibility, along with a focused commitment to our values and vision of our team members was key to the continuously changing nature of our plan. Upon reflection, we realized this flexibility is noted as essential for effective collaborative efforts aimed at addressing wicked problems. Hal Salwasser (2004) notes that "the antidote for fragmentation is coherence, shared understanding, shared commitment" (p. 21). Indeed, he argues such efforts are essential for successfully confronting a wicked problem.

Our research program aligned with participatory research best practices in that it was fairly open-ended, emergent, and collaborative. The idea was to see "how much" and what kinds of information we might receive through our outreach. Most beneficial to our efforts in researching the issue at hand was our relationship with the Nursing program students, professors, and on campus collaborative groups like IDEA who acted as an outside source to help us brainstorm ideas. Aside from those groups our outreach to the Engineering department at Grand Valley had mixed results. There was not an apparent interest in helping to design or build anything tangible for the project. However, as mentioned earlier, Professor Farris from the engineering department was willing to sit down with the team and share insight on how to brainstorm and create ideas from an engineering perspective.

The nursing program gave the team a chance to go to the Heartside neighborhood to observe the community and interact with the people working there to make a difference. Nursing Professor Nancy Schoofs and her Community Healthcare Clinical Class was working in, and studying, the same issues revolving around food and nutrition in the Heartside area. Our entire research process revolved around reaching out to as many sources and people in the field as possible, finding experts, and learning from them to help develop our idea.

Results

Similar to what Arcadia has done with their mobile market, the Glean Ride will increase access to local and healthy food in this community. The possibilities of where this program would work are endless. These efforts could be applicable in other neighboring communities facing food insecurity and hoping to increase food access.

There are some limitations to the teams plan. Establishing healthier eating habits require a few important variables to be in place: accessibility, education, and desire. Individuals need to

have access to healthier food choices, but information about the importance and benefit of incorporating healthier food options and about how to prepare various foods is also necessary. Healthy eating habits cannot be forced on an individuals and opportunities o make changes are constrained by systemic inequities. Education and information can influence and motivate people to change their diets. With this in mind, HGI is collaborating with residents in the area in order to provide health information and food education with its CSA boxes and Glean Ride food cart to create more systemic and sustainable change.

Some other unknown possible issues could come from the fact that this organization does not create a profit. Given that HGI donates the gleaned produce, they are dependent on outside sources of funding. Should problems with the equipment or even regular maintenance arise, having the funds to fix these issues could be a potential obstacle. The continued development of partnerships with local businesses, further grant opportunities, and other sources of funding will be necessary to ensure the healthy vitality and stability of HGI into the future.

Future Considerations

The Food Fighters will be able to leave the Heartside Glean Ride project in the hands of HGI and its board members to move forward with its progress. HGI will be left with a finalized concept for CSA boxes which includes a CSA signup sheet and brochure (See Appendix A). The flyers were created to bring awareness of the upcoming opportunity to partake in the weekly CSA pick-ups. HGI will be distributing the flyers to residents at the Dwelling Place Apartments located in Heartside. Lisa Blackburn is excited to offer the CSA program this summer to the residents of the Dwelling Place, and the sign-up sheet will gauge the resident's interest of the upcoming opportunities. HGI plans to include recipe/preparation ideas and nutritional information with the CSA boxes. One suggestion is to be culturally diverse in the recipes provided to the residents as a way to emphasize the experience of food and the different ways of preparation. Another consideration is to offer tasting samples of the seasonal produce items to the patrons as a way to introduce new foods that would generally be overlooked. Utilizing the Glean Ride as a mobile kitchen to conduct cooking classes with the residents is another educational opportunity to expand upon as well as creating one minute videos in various languages about the various produce offered and how to prepare it.

Our team envisions the next steps for HGI board members to meet with potential designers and general contractors to create a conceptual design and gather estimates of cost in building the Heartside's Glean Ride. A couple resourceful groups to consider collaborating with on design and build are GVSU's Paul Wittenbraker and the Civic Studio, as well as Grand Rapids Community College's construction and carpentry groups. Having a conceptual design and cost estimates to build the Glean Ride will be useful for HGI as they begin their fundraising efforts and connecting with community members who will be able to contribute towards building the Glean Ride. There are some other cost considerations to keep in mind: a vehicle with the capacity to haul the Glean Ride, insurance premiums to cover the vehicle, as well as other undetermined incidentals. A recommendation to consider would be to connect with the area

Home Builders Association (HBA) when looking for a used truck to purchase, or to collaborate with a company who might be willing to haul the Glean Cart as the organization's community service contribution.

Conclusion

In the span of 15 weeks a group of five LIB 322 students called Food Fighters, produced an outline for a mobile gleaning cart for Heartside's Gleaning Initiative and further contributed to a plan for CSA boxes. The food cart's main purpose is to transport gleaned produce to local residents who otherwise do not have reliable transportation. The overall planning of Heartside's Glean Ride was aimed to radically change the accessibility of food, alleviate transportation regarding access to food, and to further the network HGI has within the Heartside neighborhood.

While the outline of the Glean Ride was being produced, it became clear that the community it was operating in fell under several wicked problems. Food waste, food insecurity, and community sustainability were common themes that the Food Fighters noticed during communication with Heartside residents and HGI director, Professor Sission. Collectively, in response to these wicked issues, it became apparent that the team would not make any progress by following fixed research models with pre-existing results. A new alternative process was required that welcomed working with the community rather than working for the community. By including personal and local narratives within the Heartside community, the draft of the Glean Ride and the contributions to the plan for CSA boxes was developed under a transdisciplinary model. Though it is left in its very beginning stages, the Food Fighters created a solid foundation for HGI and its board members to further see to fruition.

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Appendix A

Brochure and sign-up sheet to be distributed to residents of the Heartside community and at Dwelling Place Apartments for CSA boxes.

FREE fresh locally grown produce delivered to your building!



How do I get fresh produce delivered to my building?

Heartside Gleaning Initiative works with local farms, farmer's markets, and community members to collect and distribute fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs that would otherwise be wasted. Heartside Gleaning Initiative will package this produce and provide you with a box of produce every week! Please sign up below! It is completely **FREE**



Name and address



Number of people in household

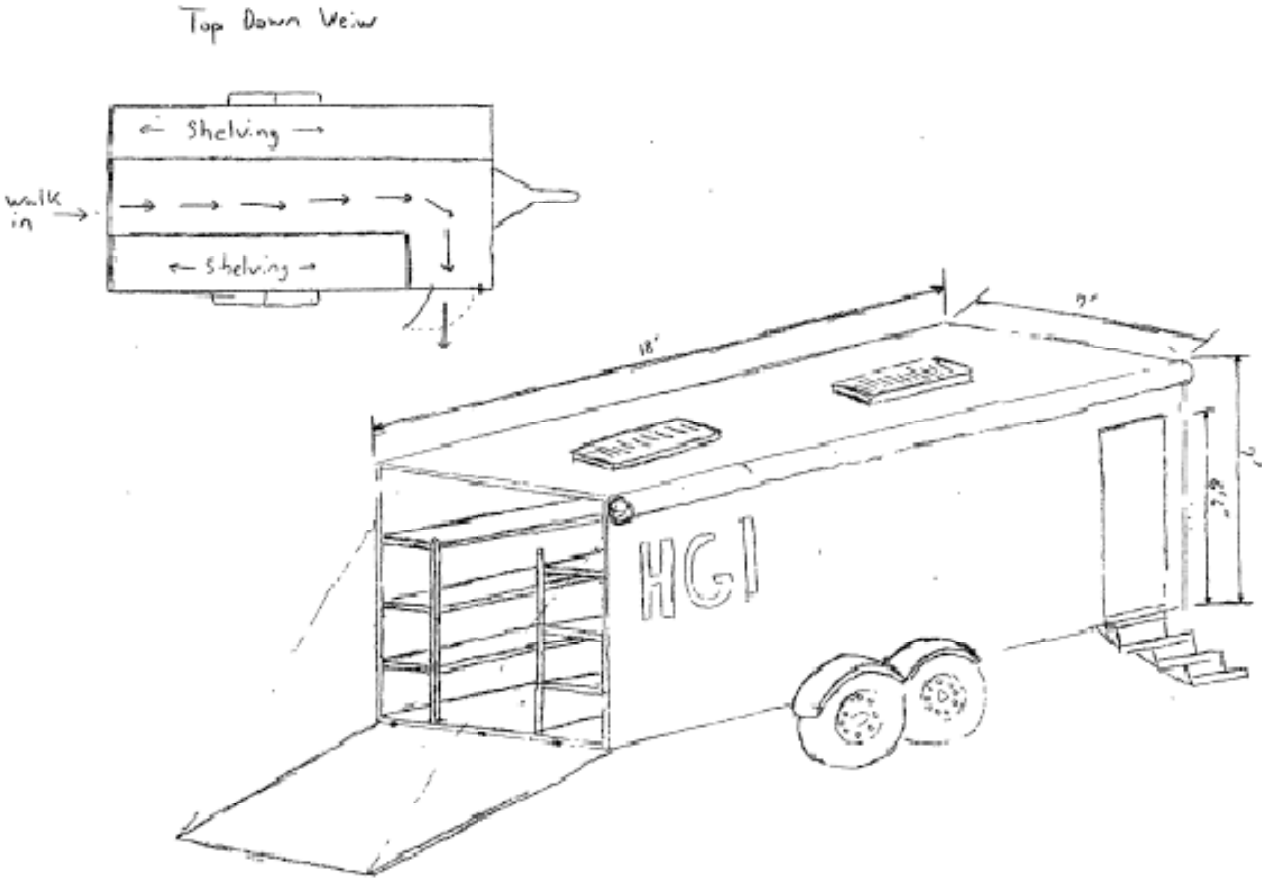


Age of people in household

- Under 10
- 11-18
- 18-45
- 45+

Appendix B

Sample drawing of Heartside Glean Ride to illustrate the concept. Please note this is not the finalized version, simply a tool used by the team to illustrate what it may look like.



Appendix C

Stakeholder (HGI) needs and statements for components of the Glean Ride – Specifications need to be measurable.

- Ability to park in a standard parking space located in Grand Rapids Downtown Market parking lot
 - Standard parking lot size: 7.5' x 9'
 - May need two spaces?
- Easy to clean shelves for displaying produce
 - Time needed to clean (ex: less than 20 mins)
 - Number of tools/cleaners used (ex: three cleaning products, surface able to be cleaned with bleach)
- Refrigerated/cooled
 - Internal temperature maintained below ____ degrees
- Ability to teach cooking classes
 - Mimic residents (Dwelling Place Apartments) kitchens
 - Number of burners/utensils/wattage
 - How many will be taught at a time?
- Display produce aesthetically
 - Cultivate understanding of this aspect through opinions or a poll
- Light/brightness
 - Measure levels of brightness (ex: equivalent to supermarket lighting)
- Ability to carry large crates
 - Interior volume of ____ ft^3
 - Define crate/box (how large will the crates and boxes be?)
- Advertising tool for HGI
 - Square footage/surface area for logo or design on exterior
 - Possibly obtain these specs from printing co.
 - Look for cost drivers: colors, area/space, size
- Load capacity
 - Load limit (based upon weekly average of produce transported)
 - Required volume (look to what is already being utilized to transport)
- Costs
 - Insurance, licensing, maintenance, fuel

Potential places to seek information: U-Haul, Ford/GM, local print shop, mechanic shop