

**Let's Talk Hunger: A Thematic
Analysis of the "Dinner and
Conversation" Event**

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Prepared for: Dr. Deborah Ballard-Reisch

Prepared by: Katie Le

Abstract

As part of a hunger awareness initiative at Wichita State University, a “Dinner and Conversation” event was held for the WSU Community on October 22, 2011. About 50 students, faculty, and staff participated in this conversation to discuss the issue of hunger on campus, possible solutions, and recommendations for addressing this issue.

An inductive thematic analysis of the conversations found three consistent themes: (1) people, especially students, feel reluctant to admit that they are food insecure due to stigma of asking for help, or the need to be self-sufficient; (2) students often eat low-budget meals regardless of nutrition or taste due to lack of resources; and (3) there are opportunities for the University to help hungry students now, and prevent symptoms of hunger in the future.

This information is a step in a much larger discussion on hunger at Wichita State. Future recommendations include collecting more research on the student population, creating a campus hunger task force, and continuing conversation on hunger issues.

Introduction

A group of Wichita State students took part in an initiative to raise awareness of food insecurity and hunger on the Wichita State University campus. The course goal was to assess the nature and scope of hunger within the WSU community because there is little research on food insecurity on college campuses.

The class planned and initiated a series of strategies and events to raise awareness of this issue, and to collect data for research. Strategies to increase awareness of the project included a blog, social media campaign, food bank drive, and a packaging event where 171 volunteers packaged more than 20,000 Numana meals for famine victims in the Horn of Africa. Throughout this process, students, faculty, and staff were encouraged to submit their hunger-related stories and experiences through the website, which was accessible during the events.

As part of an effort to collect community-based data, the ESC Health Communication team organized a “Dinner and Conversation” event. My research will be an inductive, thematic analysis of the data collected from the event in an effort to understand issues, problems, and stories of those who are or have been food insecure. About 60 students, faculty, staff, and WSU community members attended the Dinner and Conversation event, held on October 22, 2011.

The information collected resulted in several key themes and insights into the hunger problem at WSU.

Literature Review

Hunger is a prevalent problem in almost any community as studies have shown. However one of the largest populations that fall between the cracks when it comes to food insecurity research includes college students. Because this group is often absent from research, it may seem that learning more about food insecurity on college campuses is needed more than ever. Prior to analyzing the focus groups, it is necessary to understand the population, in this case, those who are food insecure in Kansas, and students at Wichita State.

According to Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization, 10 million American households are food insecure (Feeding America, 2010). In Kansas, the food bank provides for approximately 198,400 people annually, and among the clients served by emergency food programs, 80% are food insecure (Mabli, et. al. 2010).

College students are not a widely reported population in this study, but it is safe to assume that they would be included in the adult population. Interestingly enough, 18.7% of all the clients have had some college education or completed a two-year degree, and 5.5% of all clients have completed college or beyond. Similarly, it was reported that 29% of adults who visited a soup kitchen had some college or a two-year degree (Mabli, et. al. 2010).

We already know that college students have to juggle between multiple responsibilities, especially if they are living on their own, or on campus. And perhaps one of the largest obstacles of college students is having enough financial stability. In the same Feeding America study, many clients reported

having to choose between food and paying for other necessities including utilities (54%), rent or mortgage (45%), medicine or medical care (36%), and paying for gas for a car (46%). Making ends meet seems to be a problem for those who are food insecure in Kansas (Mabli, et. al. 2010). College students are susceptible to the tough economy as well, especially with the additional costs related to higher education. In fact, Kansas is among the top 10 states with the worst hunger problems. It has the 7th highest percentage of residents who are either cutting back on the quantity and quality of food, or skipping meals entirely (Kansas Food Bank, 2007).

Some other characteristics of college students at Wichita State may also be helpful in framing the context. WSU has 14,806 students who are enrolled as of Fall 2010. Of that, about 1,800 are undergraduate full-time students. The average cost of in-state tuition plus room and board is about \$17,000 every year. However, 86% of incoming students receive some form of scholarship or grant, while 45% have student loans (Wichita State University College Portrait, 2010). All of these characteristics can contribute to whether or not WSU has students who are food insecure.

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to learn whether WSU has students who are food insecure, and if there is a hunger problem on campus. If so, what might be some of the causes, and how can the university help.

Methods

The best method for learning more about hunger on campus is to conduct a thematic analysis of the conversations held on October 22. This method will better determine key themes of the event, as well as gauge the community’s experience, understanding, and interest in hunger.

“Thematic analysis is a process for encoding qualitative information. It has a number of overlapping or alternate purposes [including] a way of seeing, a way of making sense out of seemingly unrelated material, a way of analyzing qualitative information, [and] a way of systematically observing a person, an interaction, a group, a situation, an organization, or a culture, “ (Boyatzis, 1998).

This study presents an analysis of seven focus groups that included 3-5 people per group, as well as four individual interviews.

WSU Communication graduate students publicized the “Dinner and Conversation” event for several weeks in October 2011. They sought students, faculty, and staff participants who have had experience with food insecurity, and were willing to discuss the issue. Participants were provided a free meal courtesy of Sodexo, told about the initiative, and discussions lasted about 45 minutes to an hour. Most participants were willing to participate in a group discussion, while four others preferred giving personal interviews.

Subjects

The focus group participants consisted mostly of students with ages ranging from traditional (22-years old) to nontraditional (60-years-old). There were about six international students from countries such as Vietnam and Kenya. A few participants were alumni, staff, or members of the WSU community. Because participants did not fill out a survey, economic class of this population was not determined.

Procedures

Upon arrival, participants were given dinner and were randomly assigned to a discussion table. Nearly all the tables consisted of 3-5 people, as well as a discussion facilitator and a scribe. Some participants did not want to be split up from their family, so they were given a separate table. Once seated, a short presentation by the researchers was given. This included an explanation of the initiative, what the event was for, and several videos from the Hunger Action Month campaign was played to generate discussion. The 15-minute presentation concluded, and the table discussions began.

Instruments

Instruments used during the focus groups consisted of about 20 questions related to hunger. Questions asked the participants about their personal experience included whether they had experienced food insecurity, what organizations they turn to, and whether their family had ever gone hungry. Discussion facilitators were free to simply ask the questions, or use them for discussion prompts.

Data Analysis

This study will use Boyatzis's thematic analysis to determine key themes among the table discussions. As stated earlier, thematic analysis has many benefits as it enables researchers to "use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people..." (Boyatzis, 1998).

Focus Groups

The table discussions served as focus groups, which are "semi-structured group interviews, guided by a moderator to address specific topics of interest" (Krueger & Casey, 2009). There were two roles of the research team during the focus groups: the facilitator and recorder. The recorder typed notes during the focus group and afterwards reviewed the notes, and sent it to the facilitator. After the focus group, the facilitator reviewed and finalized the data file by deciding on any discrepancies and completing the final data file.

Once all the focus groups were completed, the data from the focus groups was color-coded based on table discussion so each conversation was identifiable. The content was then compiled into a master data file based on the question. Because some discussions did not ask all questions, the content was cut and pasted under a question if it answered it. None of the content was repeated. A master data file with questions and answers was then thematically analyzed using Boyatzis. See chart below.

Steps for Thematic Analysis:

1. Beginning with the first question, themes were identified and separated into lists. Themes are "a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998).
2. Once themes were put in coherent lists, they were given a code. A code is a list of themes or a categorization of themes. Thematic codes have five elements: a name, a definition of the theme, a description of when the theme occurs, a description of qualifications of the theme, and examples (Boyatzis, 1998).
3. The focus group answers were reviewed again to see if the code still fit.
4. The next question was coded using steps 1-3. The process (steps 1-3) was followed sequentially for the rest of the questions from the focus groups.
5. Themes were then reclassified and possibly given new codes.
6. Codes were compared in an iterative process to condense and consolidate.

The thematic analysis of the Dinner and Conversation discussion resulted in three key themes.

1. People, especially students, feel reluctant to admit they are food insecure due to the stigma of asking for help, or the need to be self-sufficient.

2. Students often eat low-budget meals regardless of nutrition or taste because of lack of resources.
3. There are opportunities to help hungry students now, and prevent symptoms of hunger in the future.

Social Stigma

- *People, especially students, feel reluctant to admit they are food insecure due to the stigma of asking for help, or the need to be self-sufficient.*

There seemed to be a consensus among those at the event that there is a negative social stigma to being food insecure, ergo they do not ask for help.

Participants spoke of stigmas including “parents concerned about involvement with child protective services and their inability to care for their child properly,” and “children feeling like outcasts in school settings.”

A participant who grew up in a poor household mentioned how in a small town, “You keep quiet about things like that because it was personal.”

The stigma seems to be prevalent in college students because of expectations of being self-sufficient as an adult.

One participant said, “It is hard to tell other people that [I’m] hungry. It is embarrassing to let others know that you do not have enough food.” He says college students like him do not call home even when they run out of money because they think one should feed oneself.

A student who lives off-campus says she felt ashamed of not being able to take care of herself the “way an adult should be able to do.”

Another respondent indicated that “... it was a private situation and some people think people are going to look down at you if you say something about being hungry.”

A participant who has not experienced food insecurity added, “If people knew that others are experiencing food insecurity, then they won’t feel alone and would speak up.”

Food Value

- *Students often eat low-budget meals regardless of nutrition or taste because of lack of resources.*

A common discussion topic included the value of food, specifically about cost or nutrition. There were plenty of stories about the ways that students, or those who are food insecure, can stretch a dollar in order to eat.

One respondent said, “I may buy low quality food because it’s low price, sometimes [I buy] meat close to the expiration date.” While someone added that they eats crackers at restaurants for free, but feels like he was stealing.

One man indicated that he went to a second hand store that had day old bread. He was amazed what he could cook with day old bread and eggs from a local farm that cost \$0.75 for a dozen. He also noted adding eggs to Ramen.

Several participants stated that they ate macaroni and cheese or Ramen noodles solely because it was inexpensive, and have grown tired of the taste, but continue to eat it because it is affordable.

A student who did not have a meal plan during summer courses said an organization laid out Ramen noodles for free, and that was all she ate during the summer. Now, she cannot stand the sight of them.

Another reason students often go without a nutritious meal is due to time. A male student said he often skips meals “mostly because of work and study.” Adding that he works early in the morning, goes to school, then is not home until late. Likewise, another student said she “has very little to eat during the day in school, lunch is delayed until 2 or 3 p.m... due to class schedules.”

Another common subtheme was that some participants have often gone without to provide for their family. One young, female participant who has volunteered at food pantries and homeless shelters before said, “A lot of times in my life, I open the fridge and nothing’s there and there’s nothing we can do about it,” adding that her parents went hungry to make sure the children ate.

Current and Future Opportunities

- *There are opportunities to help hungry students now, and prevent symptoms of hunger in the future.*

The discussion tables offered a lot of suggestions for ways hunger could be addressed at Wichita State University.

The first subtheme is helping hungry students who are on campus now. Discussion groups noted how WSU is not currently doing anything consistently to help hungry students. One participant said that she had heard of the campus community garden, but with three jobs and class, she had no time to go at 9:30 in

the morning. Another participant mentioned that they have not seen anything "on an organized level, but when people hear of [their] story, they offer help."

Most groups had suggestions for helping those who are hungry on campus including having "community gardens available to students, community kitchens on campus for a place to prepare meals, and transportation to surrounding grocery stores."

Other suggestions included low-income or no-income meals such as a soup kitchen, a staffed food pantry, reclaiming left over boxed lunches, reduced or free lunches based on income, and bins for dropping off or picking up food as needed. More importantly, making sure it was secure for students to receive help anonymously.

"If WSU had a food bank, there would be a need. A big problem is that [people who are hungry] don't tell anyone. People want to help others if they knew about it," said a participant.

The second subtheme is helping students prevent hunger insecurity. Groups suggested many ways for WSU to teach and provide resources to prevent food insecurity among students. Participants suggested gathering information resources for food, textbooks, healthcare, dentistry, and counseling to hand out to every student upon enrollment. "This information should be posted on bulletin boards, published in the Sunflower, and in any other way to get the word out to students and the community. This would help students in many ways."

Participants also suggested that informing students about the hunger situation and creating public awareness as a group effort would be beneficial, adding that, "WSU can't do anything if WSU doesn't know," so giving students an opportunity to ask for help.

Overall most groups agreed that the discussion was a great start, but there should be more consistent opportunities to do so. "I'm already aware, but I'm motivated more because students like you are willing to talk about it."

Discussion

The analysis of the “Dinner and Conversation” event resulted in three key themes, as well as several subthemes. Each section was helpful in learning more about the scope of the issue. For example, the analysis found that nearly all of the participants have had experience with hunger personally, or through someone they know.

Students are a population that seems to deal with hunger frequently, whether it is lack of food, or lack of nutritious food. The event showed that while there is not research on food insecurity on college campuses, the reality is that there are, and because college students are varied, the issues related to hunger are also varied. While hunger is a complicated issue, there are ways that WSU can help its students.

Suggestions of a food bank or pantry are relevant, but the logistics and structure behind them would take some time. However, what the thematic analysis tells us is that starting the conversation on hunger is a good start, and having a consistent forum for students to express their interest, ideas, or need for such services is worthwhile.

Conclusion

Limitations

Limitations in this research include not having enough participants in the focus groups. Focus groups also experience signs of “group think” especially with a sensitive topic such as hunger. If the focus groups were larger, and perhaps more varied, the content would be enhanced.

Another limitation included participants’ unwillingness to discuss the issue of hunger, and would instead discuss other topics including politics. While politics does play a role in some hunger issues, this was not the point of the discussion.

Suggestions for Future Research

Recommended future steps would be to conduct more research on target groups who are food insecure including international students, low-income, and students with families. Key informant interviews would be valuable in the context of framing the issue, as well as obtaining more data.

I would recommend conducting more focus groups in an effort to obtain data-rich analysis that would add to and enhance the key themes in this research. Having the student body fill out a survey in an effort to recognize their stances would be valuable in understanding how the university can address this issue in the future.

Appendix

1. Do you ever worry about where your next meal will come from?
2. If you have nothing to eat, what do you do? Where do you go?
3. Do you know anyone at WSU who consistently goes hungry?
4. Do you think hunger is a problem at WSU? In Wichita? In Kansas? In the US?
5. What do you think WSU should do about hunger on campus?
6. Do you think they are doing anything now?
7. Do you have any ideas on how to stop hunger locally/on campus?
8. Does your family ever go hungry?
9. Does your family get any help with food?
10. What organizations do you think are effective in reducing hunger?
11. Why do you think we have hungry people on campus?
12. Does the USA government do enough to try and reduce hunger in the US?
13. If you were the Supreme Ruler of the World for a day, what would you do to reduce hunger?
14. Before today, have you ever done anything to try and solve the hunger problem? What did you do?
15. Do you think you'll look at hunger differently after what you have done/seen/heard today?
16. Would you like for someone to contact you about the hunger issue? If so, how would you want to be contacted?
17. If you have nothing to eat, what do you do / where do you go?
18. In your home country, have you experienced any food insecurity/hunger?
19. Do people in your country realize the issue of hunger?
20. Can you cook? If yes, how often do you cook? How long time do you need to finish cooking a regular meal?
21. If you were skipping meals, what would be the causes?

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