

Connecting Through Cuisine: Increasing self perceived elderly social support through the creation of a community cookbook

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Introduction:

LC6 students had the opportunity to work with the elderly population served by Mercy Neighborhood Ministries (MNM) in Walnut Hills. Students participated in various community events to learn more about the community, the obstacles that they face, and the resources available. In initial meetings with the community partner, the importance of social connectivity amongst the older adult population kept recurring as an important asset that both MNM and Walnut Hills have. MNM is focused on supporting the older population both physically and socially through creative aging events and are always looking for new ways to bring the seniors together to battle social isolation. Therefore, our project was designed with a focus on social interaction to strengthen the already substantial bonds within the community.

Studies that have linked increased levels of social support to not only memory and higher cognitive function, but also increased life spans [1] [2]. The target population for our project are the Walnut Hills seniors served by MNM through their Creative Aging program: low income adults 60 years and older who live in zip codes 45206 and 45207 [3]. Overall, MNM have around 125 senior clients, including 63 homebound seniors with certified home care aides. MNM hosts monthly social events to prevent social isolation and provides transportation for their many patrons who have limited access to transportation.



Fig. 1: Connecting with MNM's elderly population at a "Creative Aging" event. Recipes and stories for the cookbook were collected at these events and then collated to form the final product.

Objectives:

Service:

Over the course of one year, LC6 will work to increase the "self-perceived" social connectivity of the Walnut Hills elderly community through conversation, recipe collection, and positive, shared experiences through service during pre-existing MNM events.

Learning:

Over the school year, students will better understand the seniors that MNM serves through conversations and relationships formed and the collection of recipes into a community cookbook. Additionally, students will gain a realistic grasp of how SES affects elderly populations at an individual level through interaction with members of the community.

Methods:

Through our time with the Walnut Hills community, we decided that we wanted our project to reflect the sense of connectivity that is inherent to the MNM and is also one of its greatest assets. As such, we decided to develop a community cookbook filled with recipes from the elderly residents as well as the MNM staff.

Students coordinated with Linder, the director of the food pantry, to set up times to volunteer at MNM events. Through this project, students served in pre-existing volunteer roles, while also collectively implementing this service project. At each Creative Aging event, students focused on connecting with residents and would ask for family recipes if clients were receptive to sharing for a cookbook. Students also asked each recipe contributor if they would want their picture and/or biography to be included in the cookbook to increase connectivity amongst the seniors. After collecting the recipes, students tested the recipes for feasibility and to take authentic pictures for the cookbook. Students additionally provided some tips for healthy substitutes throughout the cookbook. Finally, students assessed whether the project had a positive impact on the community by distributing and collecting a survey.

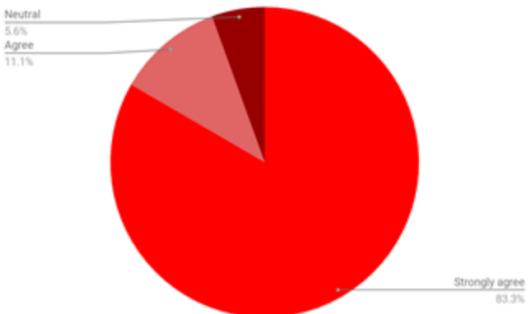
Results:

Throughout the course of the academic year, students contributed over 150 hours of community service to the residents of Walnut Hills. Students also were successful in establishing meaningful connections with some of the elderly residents that MNM serves, and were able to see first hand the struggles that the elderly population in Cincinnati face related to SES. Discussion amongst students in Learning Communities and in peer groups reflected a new awareness of struggles and difficulties faced by some of elderly participants in the community cookbook.

Students collected, cooked, and published 11 recipes from the seniors of Walnut Hills. These cookbooks, complete with biographies and client photos, were then distributed at the April Creative Aging event, with a follow up survey which gaged the seniors response to the cookbook. 18 cookbooks were distributed on one event, with 30 additional copies left for distribution at future events. Of those 18 respondents polled, results were overwhelmingly positive. Seniors were asked to respond to the statement "I enjoyed the community cookbook" with a scale of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" (Fig. 3) - and 83% of respondents strongly agreed. When asked to respond to "I enjoyed working with the medical students," 100% of those responded with "Strongly agree" or "agree" (data not shown).



Fig. 2 (left): Sample page from finished cookbook. Recipes were prepared and tested by members of LC6 in order to provide an authentic picture of the clients' food for the cookbook. Fig. 3 (right): Graph depicting survey responses to "I enjoyed the community cookbook" (n=18).



Conclusions:

In conclusion, students from LC 6 successfully connected with the elderly community served by MNM, and through service learning, were able to build connections both with and between elderly residents of Walnut Hills. This was accomplished by the creation of a tangible cookbook, and intangible relationships. Overwhelmingly, seniors were receptive and supportive of the work medical students performed throughout this service learning project, likely due to the fact that this project built on pre-existing strengths in the community, and on pre-existing services that will continue to serve this community even after LC 6 students move on in their educational journeys. Participants and community partners responded positively to this project, and students gained a better understanding of the elderly Walnut Hills community. Future projects could continue in the support of the interpersonal community that exists, as this community asset is one that must be fostered for continued utilization for future generations.

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