

Head, Heart, Hands, HealthHunger

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Abstract

In today's economically challenged times, hunger is increasing and food banks and soup kitchens are struggling to feed more people with fewer donations. To help stock local food reserves, California State University students created a food drive based on the defining components of 4-H and recruited, trained, and worked side-by-side with 4-H member volunteers from kindergarten through sixth grades. This cross-age volunteer effort resulted in 20,000 cans of donated food which translates to five months of meals or 48,000 servings for the local food bank. In return for their efforts, the college students and 4-H members changed the negative stereotypes they had held toward the homeless (Head); developed feelings of compassion and a value for sharing (Heart); engaged in an active, quantifiable service experience (Hands); and provided one of the most basic biological needs to those who are hungry and living in poverty (Health). A food drive can be an effective method of teaching the value of volunteerism and community service to people of all ages. This article outlines the steps for meshing service and learning together.

Key Words:

food drive, food bank, schools, 4-H, volunteerism, service learning

Introduction

Collaboration among community groups to meet the needs of a target population is at the core of any successful community service program. Collaboration among groups with similar values and methods make a powerful team capable of greater accomplishment. This collaborative potential exists between 4-H programs and university programs in health education. Both 4-H and health education programs provide experiential learning experiences that teach skills and make a difference in the community (National 4-H Headquarters, n.d; National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc., 2000). The guiding principles, values, and methods of both groups are similar with the difference being that 4-H communicates the essential information without professional jargon.

The Health and Community Services Department (HCSV) at California State University, Chico has developed an extensive collaboration with 4-H members in area elementary schools which has enhanced the Department's professional preparation program, 4-H members' learning experiences, and the elementary schools' participation in service learning, all while serving the local community through volunteerism. This article describes one of HCSV's powerful collaborations with 4-H, the food drive, which is particularly pertinent in today's economic climate.

The Need

In the United States today, there is an increased demand upon food banks. The 2007 unemployment rate in the U.S. was 4.6% (United States Department of Labor,

2009). For the same year, the poverty rate was 12.5% (United States Census Bureau, 2008). In addition, 11% of U.S. households (approximately 13 million people) were food insecure at some point during 2007 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2008). Poverty rate and food insecurity numbers are not yet available for 2008 or 2009, but it can be assumed there is a direct correlation between unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity. By 2009, the unemployment rate in the United States not only doubled from 2007, but reached a 20 year high of 9.4% (United States Dept of Labor, 2009). The local food bank/soup kitchen reported an increase in persons and families seeking meals and supplemental foods at the same time as donations from individuals and businesses decreased. With higher numbers of people seeking assistance from food banks, the volunteer force was stretched. The annual food drive implemented by the food bank/soup kitchen during November historically resulted in food stores for the holiday season but rarely beyond that time period. This situation provided an excellent service project for the university/4-H collaborative team.

Planning the Volunteer Effort Using the Four H's

To get the most committed effort, volunteers need to care about the affected population and feel that they can make a difference. Organizing a comprehensive learning experience based on the 4-H's of Head, Heart, Hands, and Health can move volunteers from ignorance and indifference to knowledge and motivation to take action. The method used by the HCSV department trains college students first and then allows the college students to teach 4-H members. From there, both groups work together to serve the community.

The First H - Head (Thinking)

The first step in any community service project is understanding the population in need. College students often hold negative stereotypes of homeless people. Implementing a word association activity starts the process of changing those stereotypes. For the word association, the instructor can write the word "homeless" on the board and ask the college students to call out words they associate with this word. In most cases the associated words will include smelly, dirty, mentally ill, alcoholic, etc. Then the instructor can ask the college students to imagine they were homeless and to call out words they associate with "college student." Typical responses would be rich, spoiled, privileged, etc. From this introductory activity the discussion can focus on both stereotypes and realities of those who are hungry and homeless.

In another session it is important to move beyond talking and make contact with the target population. By taking a tour the local food bank/soup kitchen, college students will be able to meet the staff and the clients. This goes a long way in developing understanding and compassion while giving the students a mental picture of who they are working for and where the impact will take place. With this enhanced knowledge of local needs the college students can then brainstorm ideas for communicating the need for a food drive to local elementary children who are 4-H members.

The Second H - Heart (Caring)

For our food drive, teams of college students identified sharing and compassion as the educational focus for training 4-H members as volunteers. Interactive educational assemblies and classroom presentations were chosen as the means of conveying this message to the younger students. College student work groups

created age appropriate skits that dramatized the feelings and experiences of families who didn't have enough money for food, and asked the children in the audience to imagine what it would feel like to go without a meal on a regular basis. The skits focused on the importance of caring for others and sharing our abundance. The children were challenged to take part in showing compassion for those who had fallen into hard times. The skits were performed two weeks prior to the food collection to give the children time to collect the food.

The Third H - Hands (Service)

The skits were performed to approximately 2,740 elementary school children asking each and every one of them to join the volunteer effort. With all of these volunteers, there needed to be organization and management. A college student and 4-H child were assigned to a classroom and took responsibility for the food coming into the classroom. Each college student/4-H child pair counted, labeled, packed, and transported the food to the food bank/soup kitchen. The sheer weight of the food as it came in and the space it consumed in the classrooms motivated both the college students and the children. The food was tangible evidence of helping that didn't need explaining and repeated strategies for encouragement.

The Fourth H - Health (Living)

Food is essential for life. In addition to the messages of compassion and sharing, information about having food in the required quantity and of nutritious quality was part of the skits and reinforced as the food was collected. For example, in small groups based on age appropriateness, children were taught to read food advertisements, clip coupons, and/or shop for affordable meals for their families.

Calculations were done on how much it costs to feed a family of four with nutritious foods. All the foods chosen on the shopping trips were analyzed for nutritional content and children were challenged to find the most nutritious food for the least money. Children were asked to identify how much of the donated food had no nutritional content. Calculations were made to determine how much money was spent on foods that may be emotionally satisfying but were not helping their health status.

Outcomes of the Food Drive

The food drive has been conducted as a university/4-H collaborative for two years. In the first year, the college students and 4-H members collected approximately 15,000 cans. This was the largest food drive the local food bank/soup kitchen had ever seen. The shelves went from being almost bare to there being no space left on the shelves for the food. During the second year, the college students and 4-H members collected over 20,000 cans which translates to five months of meals or 48,000 servings for the local soup kitchen, again exceeding any previous food drive held by the food bank/soup kitchen and exceeding the goals set by the students. These achievements met the needs of the food bank/soup kitchen. However, meeting the needs of the food bank/soup kitchen was only half of the goal of this project.

Once the food drive was completed, members of the college/4-H team were asked to write a reflection paper about their experience that included reflections about each 4-H component. These papers demonstrated in the students' words how this project significantly shaped their attitudes about volunteerism.

For the "head" section of the reflections a student wrote, "My beliefs about the homeless have changed because of this project. I always harbored the thought

that the people who ended up homeless did it to themselves. Now I view it differently and understand that things just don't go smoothly for everyone". In addition to reflections about helping this underserved population, the college students wrote that they saw the value of this experience in relation to their professional skills. "I have learned some thing about myself which have helped me understand the community and my role as a health leader. This real life example has helped me, as a health educator, by giving me experience in what I will potentially do in my future."

In the "heart" category, both college students and the 4-H children were moved by the experience of helping and developed a desire to continue to serve others. A student wrote, "Participating in this event made me a more engaged and well rounded individual. I learned that there is more to being a citizen than just one's physical ties, but rather it is the emotional ties that one has within the community that truly makes them a 'good' citizen." Another student wrote, volunteer work gives you a totally amazing feeling of pride."

In the "hands" category, the students expressed awe in how relatively small actions of many can add up to a huge accomplishment and that it should be everyone's responsibility to participate. As one student wrote, "I never realized what it took behind the scenes to get the food to feed everyone at a shelter. If everyone would just commit a little time it would make a huge impact on the community. I have the power to help others that need help and I want to do more."

Food scarcity was a new concept for many college students and 4-H members. The writings in the "health" category of the reflections showed new awareness that food doesn't just appear on your table and not having food is a devastating situation. Some students realized their own vulnerability;

"Any one of us can lose our jobs and find ourselves in need of food and shelter". In addition, the emotional and social components of health were common reflections and the students expressed a more tolerant view of others. One student wrote, "Underneath the dirty clothes, broken bike, and dirty smell, they are regular people who want to be acknowledged as human."

Summary

For the past two years the food drive has exceeded the hopes of the food bank. Beyond the food collected, the experiences of combining the 4-H members and college students resulted in high quality learning for both groups. The goals of developing a volunteer spirit, teamwork, compassion, and tolerance were evident in both groups. In addition, the college students demonstrated increased skill levels in the areas of planning, teaching, organizing, managing and leading. It is rewarding to see one's students make a contribution to the community and grow as responsible, committed citizens. Watching their real life efforts and then reading their reflections of that effort is much more meaningful than reading their conclusions after they research a paper. Volunteerism and citizenship are best taught through action, not lecture. This quote from a college student's reflection paper sums up the value of these service learning experiences: "I have taken away an experience I will remember and reflect upon throughout the rest of my life. Not only has the experience taught me the significance of helping others, but it has shown me that it takes a few to rally a community to take action and make a difference."

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About the Author

Holly Nevarez, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health and Community Services at California State University, Chico. Dr. Nevarez strives to bring real life experiences into her teaching by working with the Chico community. Before she became an instructor, Holly worked in both hospital and clinical settings for 12 years.