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Restaurant Hope: Engineering a Choice-Based Service Initiative to Address Hunger

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank Dr. Lalatendu Acharya for encouraging us to publish our work on Restaurant Hope. We would also like to thank the Islamic Society of Greater Lafayette (ISGL) and ABE-GSA for their financial contributions. Lastly, we would like to thank the amazing staff at the Lafayette Transitional Housing, who supported us and encouraged us to run Restaurant Hope and gave us the flexibility needed to be able to host these events.



RESTAURANT HOPE:

Engineering a Choice-Based Service Initiative to Address Hunger

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this service-learning project was to humanize the face of hunger for volunteers by empowering patrons attending a soup kitchen with the choice of selecting their meal for dinner. This experience helped foster an emotional connection between patrons and volunteers. A traditional soup kitchen utilizes a single-option, inexpensive meal approach that is cooked and delivered by volunteers. However, this service project, entitled Restaurant Hope, addressed these issues by providing patrons with a diverse menu. In addition, patrons were given the opportunity to request more food (to try other options on the menu) and take home leftover food depending on availability. Choices patrons made in terms of menu preferences were tracked. Volunteers, soup kitchen administrators, and patrons were interviewed to obtain feedback on this service initiative and how it impacted their perceptions on the issue of hunger in their local community.

INTRODUCTION

In Tippecanoe County, Indiana, home of Purdue University, one out of every five residents lives in a state of poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). These low-income individuals and families face many difficult choices with their limited financial income (e.g., choosing which bills to pay, how to pay for transportation to work, when to purchase clothing or personal hygiene products). One of the most difficult choices centers on access to food for oneself and family. Food Finders, a food bank that provides over 7 million pounds of food each year to

agencies such as soup kitchens in Tippecanoe County, indicates that half of their clients face the difficult decision of choosing between food and paying for other basic necessities, such as rent (Food Finders Food Bank, n.d.). Many low-income residents depend upon the generosity of local agencies such as food pantries, homeless shelters, and soup kitchens to provide free meals during the day (typically available once or twice daily). While many of these agencies address the basic food needs of this underserved population in our community, there is an important component missing from many of these free meal services—empowering the patrons with the choice to select the meal they wish to eat.

Meals are prepared in advance by volunteers at most local agencies/soup kitchens that provide free meals to homeless and low-income community members. Typically the meal consists of a main dish (such as spaghetti), a side dish (garlic bread), and a dessert (cake). Patrons who attend the meal either must consume the food provided or choose to go hungry. However, volunteers who prepare the meals often do not realize that patrons may be uncomfortable consuming the food prepared, for multiple reasons, including health-related, religious dietary restrictions, and personal preference. With regard to health-related issues, the high-stress environment created by living in poverty can contribute to individuals suffering from a variety of medical diseases including hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, thus limiting patrons' ability to consume certain foods high in salt, cholesterol, or sugar (Brody et al., 2013; Chaufan, Davis, & Constantino, 2011; Jones et al., 2009; Kim, Berger, & Matte, 2006);



Figure 1. Sample menus provided to patrons attending Restaurant Hope.

other patrons may have allergies (including dairy, gluten, and peanut-based products). With regard to religious dietary restrictions, Orthodox Jews must consume kosher products, while Muslims have meat restrictions (cannot consume pork products). While it would be difficult for agencies to address all of these issues, providing patrons with multiple food options for meals is one mechanism to address this problem. Restaurant Hope (RH) is an ingenious model that addresses the issue of giving patrons the opportunity to select their meal options.

RH differs from a traditional soup kitchen format in three ways. First, patrons are provided with a menu (Figure 1) containing multiple options for a main dish, side dish, dessert, and drink (similar to a restaurant). Second, while volunteers play a role in preparing and serving the meal to patrons (as in a traditional soup kitchen), certain volunteers are designated to function as service staff (walking among guests to take their meal order, engaging them in conversation, and delivering nicely plated meals from the kitchen staff to each guest). This provides volunteers with an opportunity to come face-to-face with the guests they are serving to enhance the degree of hospitality and compassion provided to guests. Traditional soup kitchens, in contrast, serve meals through a service window or out of large pots/trays. Additionally, RH allows guests to engage service staff to inform them of dietary restrictions they may have so staff can guide them to menu items that are suitable to address their concerns.

Finally, organizers of RH design the menu to ensure a diverse array of meal options. To help keep meal costs affordable, dishes that use similar base components are utilized (such as a protein or vegetables that can be used in multiple menu items including a soup, sandwich, and pasta dish). Transforming a traditional soup kitchen into a restaurant-style service empowers attendees by including them in the decision-making process of selecting their meal. For volunteers, this experience provides a forum to express respect, courtesy, charity, and compassion to patrons experiencing hunger by waiting on and serving the patrons' requests and needs. Direct contact with local community members experiencing hunger also provides volunteers with an opportunity to see the impact hunger has on their local community. RH has been conducted on four separate occasions. The last iteration of RH was conducted through the World Food Problems course (AGRY 59000), in which the food choices were recorded and both patrons and volunteers were interviewed.

DESIGN OF RESTAURANT HOPE

In order to successfully conduct an RH event, the following three elements are critical: (1) participation of volunteers, (2) a convenient location for preparation of food, and (3) a menu that incorporates a variety of different dishes that are simple to prepare and share similar ingredients. Ten to fifteen volunteers are required to function efficiently at an RH event that



Figure 2. Volunteers from the ISGL Youth Group serve guests attending Restaurant Hope at the Lafayette Transitional Housing.

serves approximately 30 patrons. We utilized a diverse pool of volunteers from the local Purdue University student body and a youth group in the Greater Lafayette area to conduct RH (Figure 2). This provided a rich base of volunteers with different ages, skillsets, races, ethnicities, and religion. Volunteers for RH were solicited through a short presentation that described the numerous benefits of serving others in need.

The second element in conducting a successful RH event is designation of a location to prepare and serve food. Requirements include the following:

- The facility should have basic equipment needed to prepare food on the proposed menu;
- The dining area must be spacious enough to accommodate up to 40 guests and have enough aisle space between tables for service staff (e.g., waiters/waitresses); and
- The facility should not support or espouse any religious or political views and/or agendas that may prevent volunteers from supporting an event conducted at the facility.

Taking these factors into consideration, Lafayette Transitional Housing (LTH) was selected by the organizers as the location for the RH event. LTH is equipped with two stoves, a wide range of pans

and pots that greatly assist in preparation of meals, a spacious kitchen and dining area that makes it convenient to accommodate patrons and set up/serve food, and an administrative staff that is very supportive of hosting the event.

The third element for RH involves designing a simple menu that incorporates a variety of dishes. The reason behind simplicity is twofold: (1) all items must be cooked and prepared in under one hour and (2) it is important to manage food costs to ensure this event is feasible financially. The motivation behind designing a menu with a variety of meal options was the essence and the crux of this project. For this reason, a menu that provided a full three- to four-course meal consisting of a soup, an entrée, side dish, dessert, and drink was prepared. Minimal base ingredients were utilized to create different types of dishes. For example, if chicken (breast) was cooked, then it was used in a chicken parmesan entrée, chicken noodle soup, and mixed with different sauces to create multiple sandwiches such as a buffalo chicken sandwich or a BBQ chicken sandwich.

METHODOLOGY

A total of four RH events were organized from 2013 through 2014. These events were conducted with a

diverse group of organizations including the Islamic Society of Greater Lafayette (ISGL) Youth Group (IYG), Purdue Agricultural and Biological Engineering Graduate Student Association (ABE-GSA), graduate students from Purdue's Department of Consumer Sciences, and through the Purdue World Food Problems class (AGRY 59000). This paper summarizes the overall experience of all four events. To get a better sense of the community that RH served, a waiter checklist was prepared during the last event that assisted service staff to record the food preferences of guests who attended RH (see Figure 3). In addition, a quick demographic study (relative age and gender) was conducted to further understand the patron population. Finally, a quick evaluation was conducted immediately after the dinner service to gauge the overall experience of the patrons, volunteers, and administrators who participated in RH. The following questions were asked as part of the evaluation:

Volunteers

1. Please describe your experience with Restaurant Hope.
2. What were the differences in this experience and previous soup kitchen experiences?
3. What did you think about the food choices we provided?

Patrons

1. Did you enjoy Restaurant Hope?
2. What was your favorite aspect of Restaurant Hope?
3. How did the menu choices affect your food experience?

RESULTS

Volunteers, both youth and adults, benefited from participating in RH. Initially, participants from the IYG were tepid and scared as to what the experience would entail (many had never served in a soup kitchen before). However, after preparing meals from scratch, serving patrons who attended RH, and learning more about the personal difficulties patrons experienced in their daily lives, RH gave youth a new perspective on the issue of hunger in their local community. They understood that not everyone in their community has regular access or choice to obtain three meals per day. One IYG youth member met a classmate during one of the RH events and was shocked to realize he knew someone affected by hunger each day.

Table # _____	Chair # _____	Order # _____	
M / F		C / A / E	
Drinks			
___ Grape	___ Apple	___ Water	
Soup:			
___ Tomato	___ Minestrone	___ Chicken Noodle	
Notes: _____			
Bread:			
___ Garlic	___ Fresh French	___ Grilled Cheese	
Notes: _____			
Entree:			
___ Parmesan	___ Alfredo	___ Chow Mein	___ Marinara
Notes: _____			
Dessert:			
___ Pumpkin pie	___ Cherry Pie	___ Brownie	
___ Ice cream			
Notes: _____			

Figure 3. Order form utilized by service staff volunteers to record meal selections of Restaurant Hope guests.

Adult volunteers' responses also were very positive. The overall sentiment of the volunteers was that RH was an enjoyable service-learning experience. The opportunities to interact with colleagues outside of work, to cook meals, the feeling of being in a real restaurant kitchen, and the happiness patrons expressed when menus were provided to them were all benefits observed at RH as cited by volunteers. When asked how different RH was from other service experiences, one interviewee responded that "The options, the way volunteers served people . . . there was an element of kindness . . . they treated the people as if they are regular people and not people in need, just as a regular person would visit a restaurant, there was no judgment, and the volunteers gave it their all. This was different from my other experiences . . ." The volunteer continued by describing that in a regular soup kitchen, although unintentional, there is a sense of entitlement and an "I am better than you because I am serving you" attitude. Other volunteers said RH gave them a sense of pride, and although it was a stressful experience, it was worth it because patrons felt they were being cared for and empowered in the process of choosing the meal they wanted to consume. Surprisingly, three of the five adult

volunteers from the last RH event had never volunteered in a U.S. soup kitchen before. One volunteer commented, “It was informative; I didn’t know that people who lived in those areas needed food.” After the first RH event, employees at LTH commented how much both they and the attendees enjoyed the restaurant-style version and looked forward to the next RH event.

Patrons who attended RH expressed appreciation for the food choices and service provided by the organizers. After the fourth RH event, a total of 14 evaluations were collected—nine from patrons and five from volunteers. Most patrons responded that their favorite aspect of RH was the courtesy, respect, and customer service shown to guests by volunteers. Interestingly, only two patrons specifically mentioned that their favorite aspect of RH was having a choice in selecting their dinner meal. However, many alluded to their appreciation for having multiple options to choose from by suggesting that they liked everything available on the menu. The patrons enjoyed being served by the volunteers as well as the one-on-one connection guests experienced with the volunteers. While it might not have been their favorite aspect, many patrons were supportive of having a choice in selecting the meal they wanted to eat for dinner. Some stated that giving someone a choice gives them the ability to follow their religious convictions (e.g., avoid eating pork). Other interviewees pointed out that when given a choice between eating something they do not like and going to sleep hungry, they (or their family) would choose hunger, and thus choice is critical in ensuring these individuals have access to food they want to consume. One patron, during the third iteration of Restaurant Hope (summer 2014), was emotionally moved by the experience such that he expressed his appreciation by writing a poem in Russian for the volunteers (Figure 4).

The comments provided by the patrons were visible in the statistical analysis conducted from the feedback collected during the fourth iteration of RH (fall 2014). A total of 22 orders were completed and only two were

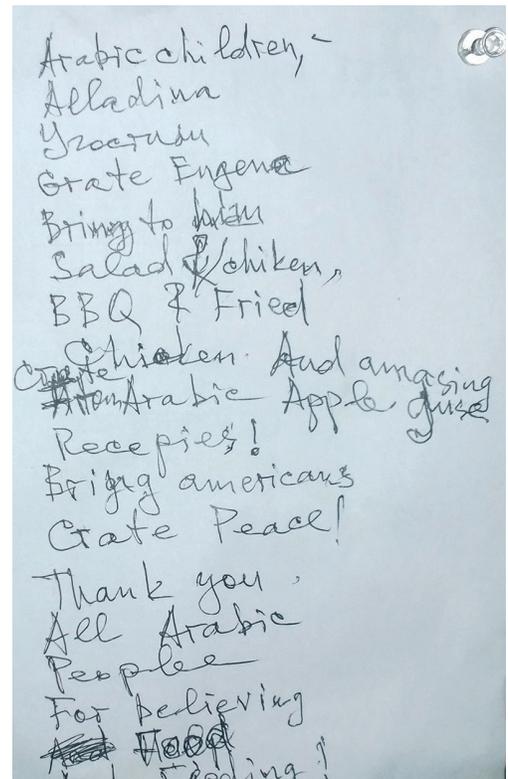


Figure 4. Poem composed by guest of Restaurant Hope expressing her gratitude to the volunteers who organized the event.

found to be identical. Another interesting note was that some patrons did not order one item from each category; instead, based on their preferences, some guests skipped entire categories (Table 1). There were clear preferences in certain menu items. For example, chicken noodle soup (69%), grilled cheese sandwiches (61%), and pumpkin pie (57%) were by far the favorite soup, side, and dessert items, respectively. Other items were more equally split, such as grape juice (53%) compared to apple juice (47%) and chicken alfredo pasta (47%) in comparison to chicken parmesan (35%). Finally, we found that the majority of the patrons who attended RH, at LTH, were male (77%) and adults (75%). Children and elders were equally distributed, with each making up 12.5% of the total surveyed population.

Drinks	Soups	Sides	Entrée	Desserts*
Grape—7	Tomato—3	Garlic—5	Parmesan—6	Pumpkin Pie—8
Apple—8	Minestrone—2	French—2	Alfredo—8	Cherry Pie—2
Water—0	Chicken Noodle—11	Grilled Cheese—11	Chow Mein—2	Brownie—4
			Marinara—1	
Total—15	Total—16	Total—18	Total—17	Total—14

Table 1. Orders placed at the fourth iteration of Restaurant Hope (fall 2014). A patron could select one dish/drink from each of the five categories. A total of 22 orders were filled, indicating that patrons did not choose all five categories.

*In addition, 10 orders of ice cream (w/wo pie) were placed.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the series of RH events was well received by both the soup kitchen administrators and the patrons. In addition, many volunteers were left with a deeper sense of understanding and stronger compassion for the issue of homelessness and hunger in their local community. With regard to the youth participants, many were eager to participate in future community service events and have consistently requested the IYG mentors to arrange more RH events. The IYG mentors are currently sponsoring another RH event planned for summer 2015.

EVALUATION

In the Purdue World Food Problems class, one major issue discussed was the link between obesity and wealth status. Generally, people with lower economic status have higher obesity levels. The cause is multifaceted, but includes the facts that high calorie and carbohydrate foods tend to be cheaper, fast-food and unhealthy foods tend to be more accessible to families, and grocery stores usually are not located in poor communities (convenience stores sell items at a higher price compared to grocery stores). Another complicit factor is cultural preference, including advertisement of junk food. The last iteration of RH tested this theory by providing patrons with traditional/familiar foods in addition to new/less familiar cuisines. Overall, there was a very strong preference for culturally known cuisines. For example, chicken noodle soup accounted for about 70% of all orders, while minestrone (Italian) accounted for only 13%. Similarly, standard pasta dishes (alfredo/parmesan) accounted for about 80% of the orders while chow mein only accounted for 12%. This small experiment highlights the general preferences for foods one is accustomed to, and also highlights the danger of advertising junk/unhealthy food to youth.

FEEDBACK

One of the major concerns about RH, though the events are extremely well received, is it has not effectively addressed the four points causing hunger in local U.S. communities. Based on the World Food Problems course, the four factors that compound hunger are:

- Time: Lack of time to purchase groceries and prepare meals.
- Knowledge: Limited knowledge of both creating delicious/nutritious food and where to purchase inexpensive raw materials/items.

- Money: Limited financial capabilities.
- Distance: The availability and access of cheap grocers to impoverished community members.

While it is impossible for one service project to effectively address all four obstacles that contribute to hunger in our communities, RH can be used to effectively address one of the issues (knowledge). In a future RH event, volunteers will first compete in developing a tasty and nutritious meal that can serve four people for under \$4. The recipes from this competition will be compiled both in written and video form. The ingredients for these recipes will then be collected through a food drive and arranged in food baskets, with each basket containing the ingredients needed to recreate one of the recipes. The best meals (decided by volunteers) will be prepared at a future RH event. After the event, patrons will be given food baskets (containing the raw ingredients for the meals they ate) so they can recreate the meals they enjoyed in RH in the comfort of their own home.

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