Examining the Barriers to Community Engagement in a Low-Income Lafayette Community

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Lafayette’s Quality of Life Council released a report entitled “From Good to Great: Making Greater Lafayette a Community of Choice,” in which the council collected data from the community to gauge quality of life. The report includes seven metrics to evaluate the well-being of Lafayette residents: healthy living environment, diverse employment opportunities, educational opportunities, social capital and safety, cost of lifestyle, entertainment availability, and the ease of transportation (Greater Lafayette Commerce, 2012). This study, though benefiting the greater community, seemed focused on what would encourage young professionals to stay in the area but did not consider other populations, such as those of a lower socioeconomic status. Despite data from over 1,500 anonymous survey responders, there is little indication of programs intended to specifically benefit the low-income community in Lafayette, and in addition, the four focus groups held consisted of community leaders, retirees, young professionals, recent graduates, and entrepreneurs (Greater Lafayette Commerce, 2012). For that reason, there appeared to be a lack of information on what those in poverty felt was important to their quality of life.

According to the most recent U.S. Census data, an estimated 19.9% of Lafayette’s population lives in poverty, whereas in a town like Fishers, Indiana, only 3.4% of the population is below the poverty level; the national average is 12.3% (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The U.S. Census determines who is in poverty using set income thresholds that are determined by family size and composition. A family whose total income is below that threshold is considered living in poverty. In Lafayette, the median household income between 2012 and 2016 was $42,641, compared to the national median household income of $55,322 during the same years. Although the Census measures poverty solely based on income, there are other correlations that may indicate poverty. The percentages of people in Lafayette with a bachelor’s degree or higher (24.1%), people without health insurance under the age of 65 (16.7%), and owner-occupied housing units (47.1%) are all less than the respective national averages (30.3%, 10.2%, and 63.6%).
To better understand what quality of life factors are important to low-income families in Lafayette, Dr. Jason Ware, a Purdue Honors College faculty member interested in qualitative well-being research, led the interdisciplinary course HONR 29900 Well-Being. In this course, we studied how various professionals, such as the global affairs and lifestyle magazine *Monocle* and quality of life researcher Ruut Veenhoven, measure quality of life indicators for well-being, before doing our own work with community partners who serve low-income families in Lafayette. We focused on three organizations: Habitat for Humanity, the Lafayette Adult Resource Academy, and the Hartford Hub. I and eight other students formed a team to work with the Hartford Hub, intending to identify what residents thought were influential factors of their well-being, but first we needed to find residents to talk with us. Before we could begin, we had to get past some of the barriers to community engagement so that we could gain a better understanding of what well-being meant to them. Owing to this obstacle, we had to adjust our intentions from solely studying indicators of well-being to investigating what barriers prevented community interaction at the Hartford Hub.

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

The Hartford Hub is a neighborhood center located in the lower Lincoln neighborhood in the north end of Lafayette, founded in August 2016. A neighborhood center is different from a community center in that it serves a much smaller population on a more personal level, but both seek to provide opportunities for social, educational, and recreational activities. Located at 1103 North 6th Street, the property was previously a closed-down bar, but the city wanted to put the lot to better use. The Faith Community Development Corporation of Lafayette conducted meetings and surveys with residents to determine the best use for the space, and ultimately came up with the Hartford Hub, a safe place for the children in the neighborhood to get together to have fun and work on homework (Faith Community Centers, 2018). According to the managers of the Hub, Joey Wright and Stefan Nitzschke, the intent is for the Hub to become a “third space” for residents—not home or work, but just somewhere that they want to be in their free time, relaxing and socializing with others. On a typical day, kids are running around playing or doing school work, but there are hardly ever any adult residents there, except volunteers from the Faith Corporation. Of families living in the Lincoln Neighborhood, 43.6% of those households are under the poverty level, and 82.2% of housing units are rented, indicating financial hardship for many families and a high turnover of people moving in and out. Most children who frequent the Hub are African American, many of them being raised by a single mother, as single mothers account for 77% of the neighborhood’s family households (City of Lafayette, 2016).

The Hartford Hub has ameliorated some of the issues that the lower Lincoln area faces by virtue of its existence. According to residents at neighborhood meetings, their greatest concern is for the safety of children in an area with relatively high drug use. In and around the Lincoln neighborhood, the Lafayette Police Department has reported 597 incidents of drug abuse between April 26, 2017, and April 26, 2019 (Lafayette Police Department, 2019). The Hub seeks to keep the kids safe by offering them a secure space to spend time together, playing and learning. Beyond that, the Hub also wants to provide social and educational opportunities for the adult residents, but has trouble getting them to participate in programming such as bingo nights or financial literacy classes. As for volunteers, the Hub accepts them year-round to help with tutoring and mentoring the kids, as well as helping organize larger events at the Hub. These volunteers are accepted as they come, but for specialized projects. Dr. Ware has partnered with the Hub in both the spring and fall semesters of 2017 and 2018 in his Urban Youth Activism and Well-Being courses, giving students the opportunity to volunteer and perform qualitative research at the Hub.

**OUR PROJECT**

In fall 2017, Dr. Ware and Joey Wright had already agreed to partner for the purposes of the Well-Being class. Throughout the semester our group made many trips to the Hartford Hub to talk with Joey and Stefan, attend neighborhood meetings, engage with the community, and help run the pumpkin carving event. The first step our group took in this endeavor was to visit the Hartford Hub and the Lower Lincoln neighborhood, as most of us had not been to those locations before.

By the beginning of October, we knew that Joey was more than willing to host an event with us at the Hub for the Halloween season. Following a brainstorming session, we settled on hosting a free pumpkin carving night for families at the Hub, prioritizing affordability and accessibility. With the event decided, our team drafted a list of supplies given a $300 budget, including 30 pumpkins and electric candles, 20 carving kits, tarps to cover the floor, and a simple flyer to distribute to neighborhood residents. Joey and Stefan agreed to
provide refreshments for the event as well as procure gift cards to give out as prizes to the best pumpkins, determined by an informal panel of judges. The event was held on Friday, October 27, at 6:00 p.m., and two days prior three other students and I went to work handing out fliers door to door in the neighborhood around 5:00 p.m. We did our best to cover houses within two blocks of the Hub in any direction, but were unable to access some of the apartment complexes, and faced many unanswered doors. Later that evening, three other students, Dr. Ware, and I went shopping for the supplies and brought them to the Hub, storing the numerous pumpkins in their shed until Friday.

On Friday we arrived at the Hub around 5:30 p.m. to begin setting up, and had plenty of help from the 10 or so kids who were already there. Due to the cold, we held the event inside the Hub’s all-purpose room, laying tarps over the floor to keep the room clean. Once the event started, we were busy supervising the kids whose parents were absent and helping them carve pumpkins, many of them for the first time.

As the night went on, a few adults and their kids trickled in. Joey and Stefan made a point of visiting families they knew in the neighborhood to tell them about the event while it was happening, which boosted attendance. Approximately seven families were there, along with over 10 kids, all of whom seemed to have a nice time. Once all the pumpkins were carved, we lined them up on the wrap-around porch outside to start the judging for the categories of scariest, coolest, and most unique.

With the winners chosen, we cleaned up after the event, again with plenty of help from the kids, and enjoyed some hot apple cider with the kids and residents still around. This was the largest event we participated in during the semester, but we were also fortunate enough to conduct an interview with a resident in the weeks following the event, which provided valuable insight into the function of the neighborhood.

Two of our team members conducted the interview at the Hub using a semistructured interview protocol to allow for open-ended discussion. Our team collaboratively developed questions that would provide insight into what residents correlated with their well-being. We considered the metrics used by Lafayette’s Quality of Life council (healthy living environment, diverse employment opportunities, educational opportunities, social capital and safety, cost of lifestyle, entertainment availability, ease of transportation), and more so the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index (purpose, social, financial, community, physical) when writing our own interview questions. We referenced the Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index because we felt it represents quality of life factors well, being the world’s largest well-being data set (Gallup Sharecare Well-Being Index, 2018). The questions we devised fit into five broad categories (living situation, community, jobs, education, and physical and mental health) that would allow us to identify influential factors in each of the Gallup Sharecare well-being indices. Our questions ranged from fact-based collection to more open-ended statements like “Tell me about . . . ,” and many of the questions were interdependent, so more time was spent on questions that were relevant to our participant’s life. The interviewee we worked with answered all our questions without issue and took opportunities to expand on questions conversationally.

As a whole, our work with the Hartford Hub over the semester was a unique experience thanks to Dr. Ware’s course, but came to an end in December. However, Joey expressed interest in continuing to work with Purdue students in this matter, so perhaps similar work and projects
another young man had just moved in with his family and wanted to see what was happening. Despite it being their first time at the meeting, they fit right in with the rest, and no one was excluded from the discussion. Though it was a small group, it was great to see how this safe space, the Hartford Hub, could help people let down their guard, get to know their neighbors, and make plans for the future.

As I have mentioned before, the greatest challenge in working with the community in the Lower Lincoln Neighborhood was assembling the community. For whatever reasons each resident may have, there is a lack of adult participation at the Hartford Hub. It could be due to conflict with their jobs, xenophobia due to neighborhood crime, or even religious differences, as the Hub is affiliated with Faith Ministries, a Christian organization. We were unable to gather enough data to definitively say why adults do not take advantage of the resources at the Hartford Hub.

At the end of the fall semester, our research with the Hartford Hub came to an end. On December 11, we presented our experiences and insights to Joey Wright, in the hope that he could take what we had learned and use it to improve programming as he saw fit. We were able to conclude that the pumpkin-carving event was a success, and that if the Hartford Hub could get people in the door, they would make great strides towards building a sense of community, thereby improving residents’ quality of life.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Our initial objective was to determine what factors affect residents’ quality of life in the Lower Lincoln Neighborhood and understand how those could be influenced to improve residents’ well-being. However, barriers to community engagement required us to pivot and ask what factors were preventing community interaction. Since our research was qualitative, our success depended on whether we had an answer to the above questions, which we did. By far, the most prevalent influence on residents’ quality of life was the perceived safety of the neighborhood. At neighborhood meetings, residents spoke of their own homes being broken into, cars being totaled due to reckless driving outside their homes, a lack of working street lights, and witnessing drug deals. While these are concerns for the adults, they seemed more worried about children being out too late or finding used needles near bus stops. Additionally, during my time handing out fliers, I noticed many residents seemed hesitant to talk to someone they did not know, only opening their doors halfway and quickly ending the conversation. From all this, it was clear that a lack of residents’ sense of security was the greatest barrier to community engagement. We found that safety is a fundamental of quality of life; without it, it is difficult for a person to let down their guard and get to know their neighbors, build supportive communities, and form loving relationships.

Establishing communities and trust takes time, but during the pumpkin carving event we were able to provide a setting for seven families to meet and relax together at the Hub. Joey and Stefan reflected on the great success of the night when compared to events they have held in the past. Bringing people together and getting to see their interaction in an informal environment demonstrated that a safe place allows for people to let down their guard and meet their neighbors—the first step towards improving community well-being.

After the event, the next largest group we saw was at the neighborhood meeting in November, with approximately 10 residents present. At that meeting, I saw residents interacting with each other, getting excited about starting a neighborhood newsletter, planning community dinner events for the holidays, and deciding to decorate the Hartford Hub for the Christmas season. There were some familiar faces from previous trips to the Hub, but there were also some new ones. One of the new women present has children who regularly attend the Hub, and

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STUDENT IMPACT

I had never thought much about quality of life when I first saw HONR 29900 Well-Being in the course catalog, but studying community indicators for quality of life specifically in urban poor communities piqued my
interest. Despite my lack of experience doing similar work, and the resulting nervousness, I knew that this would be a remarkable chance to get out of my comfort zone and learn something beyond the offerings of any lecture hall. When deciding which community partner to work with, I chose the Hub because it was unknown to me and I wanted to better understand what a neighborhood center was really like and know its purpose. In the end, my experience in this course working with the Hartford Hub to do qualitative research was an unparalleled learning experience. While traditional classes have me sitting in lecture halls or in front of computer screens, this course had me constantly working with a team and getting off campus and into an unfamiliar community. I once heard that for a game designer to create scenarios that offer users an impactful experience, it is important for the designer to have had a variety of life experiences. I aspire to create games, worlds, and stories that leave players with a lasting positive impact, and without a firm understanding of human nature, I doubt I would be able to do so.

What I am most grateful to have had from this experience is a better understanding of how complex each individual’s life is. I did not realize that poverty was an issue on the other side of the river in Lafayette, even after attending Purdue University for a year. I had heard that people live in poverty, that there was crime in certain neighborhoods, but these had always been outside of my life—just things I heard about. Walking through the Lower Lincoln Neighborhood and talking with residents, I realized the reality of the situation. I never knew what hardships some people in poverty have to face, but hearing from and talking to residents in a poor neighborhood gave me a good idea of the real problems they face like finding used needles outside their homes or having their homes broken into. This has made me more empathetic not only for people in poverty, but for people of all socioeconomic statuses. No matter how much money someone has, without hearing and seeing firsthand, there is too much guesswork involved in trying to know another’s experiences, which leads to misunderstanding and stereotyping. This service learning experience opened my eyes to the fact that many of my preconceived notions were wrong, and that I should not be so quick to assume but rather be more patient and understanding that each experience is unique to the person living it.

From the onset, we knew we wanted to perform qualitative research to identify factors that influence residents’ quality of life, but were quickly informed that the adult residents we would need to talk to did not attend the Hartford Hub. It was valuable to spend time in the neighborhood early on to get a feel for the atmosphere, just by walking along the streets, as the disconnect between neighbors was evident. This created a new goal for us: organize an event for adults to gather at the Hub. Our team planned a pumpkin carving event so that we could start building relationships with adult residents and help them feel more comfortable at the Hartford Hub among their neighbors. I took every opportunity possible to get to know residents in a natural way, not as a researcher but as another person. This included the pumpkin carving event, two neighborhood meetings, and handing out fliers. I made sure I was at all of these events so that I could get to know more residents, but we all learned that it takes time to build trust, and time was something we were short on due to other courses, jobs, and personal matters. If I could change the experience, I would have made it longer, as we did not start visiting with our community partner until the fourth week of the semester. We had hoped to put on a second event at the end of November, but between our group and the Hub, there were not enough resources to do it. I believe that with more time, we would have been able to get more contact with residents and gain more insights into their well-being.

CONCLUSION

The Hartford Hub is always willing to accept new student volunteers to help mentor children or organize programming, as there are plenty of kids attending the Hub daily who are in need of educational assistance and good role models. As an extension of the Faith Community Development Corporation, the Hub’s goals to mentor kids and provide resources for the neighborhood align with the Faith Corporation’s mission to improve community well-being. Should students ever have the opportunity to do well-being research with the Hartford Hub in the future, I recommend that they get out of their comfort zones as soon as possible and have an open mind when listening to others’ stories. Having done that, there is much more to be gained from the relationships they will build.

Besides being a valuable experience for myself, this experience was also beneficial for the Hartford Hub. I now have a more empathetic understanding of others, while having had fun along the way, and the Hub benefited from having a group of students help organize an event that brought more members of the community together for an evening. Although attending neighborhood meetings, walking through the neighborhood, putting on the pumpkin carving event, and interviewing a resident allowed us to identify the aforementioned
barriers to community engagement, those obstacles remain. One of the barriers is residents’ sense of security, and another is lack of time between jobs, both of which prevent them from getting to know one another better and forging a strong community. Residents that we spoke with also outlined concerns about drug activity and theft in the neighborhood, and, while going door to door to advertise the pumpkin carving event, it was clear that most residents wanted nothing to do with people they did not know.

My hope is that those who read this article understand the value of service learning opportunities like this one. They allow for meaningful learning in a real-world setting, where I believe one can learn more than they ever will in a classroom. I want my positive experience in escaping my comfort zone to encourage people to try something new, and maybe uncomfortable, for the sake of others.

REFERENCES


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