A QUALITATIVE PROCESS EVALUATION OF A MEAL SERVICE PROGRAM

By
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Abstract

This study serves to evaluate the process of a meal service program, local to Northeast Mississippi, in response to the need to evaluate methods of alleviating food insecurity as it continues to be a growing and evolving issue in the American South. The researcher chose to employ qualitative research methods in order to understand the program guests, volunteers, and board members' perceptions of the program's processes using data from interviews with members of each group, a focus group composed of program guests, and photovoice projects completed by program guests. The researcher used thematic analysis to interpret the data and defined three themes relevant to understanding the processes of the meal service program. The themes include viewing positive social interaction as an indicator of program success, expanding the program's resource offerings as a vision for improvement, and recognizing the program's shift from its foundational purpose to serving its current niche.

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I. Introduction

Food insecurity is a growing and evolving problem in the United States today. A matter that was once understood simply as insufficient access to food is now understood with more nuance as a lack of access to nutritionally adequate food. An individual may be eating a sufficient number of calories but still be considered food insecure, as he or she has a nutrition deficit. This means that the number of individuals considered to be living under this status is larger than previously understood (Handforth, 2012). Research in the realm of food security has also begun to consider lack of food as a chronic plight rather than a transient state, as families and individuals are increasingly found to suffer from food insecurity as a persistent state of living, which significantly alters the approach and structure of programs designed to alleviate the issue (Bazerghi, 2016). Mississippi in particular, along with other states included in the Lower Mississippi Delta (LMD) region, has been identified as one of the top five states for high rates of food insecurity in proportion to population (Stuff, 2004). Take this prevalence of food insecurity into consideration with the above national average rates of chronic health complications such as hypertension, obesity, and Type Two diabetes that exist in this same area (known as the LMD region) (McGee, 2011), and one can begin to understand how the issue permeates an already impoverished region serving as a further detriment to already disadvantaged populations.

Connell et al. (2007) have conducted research in the same geographic region and have found that specifically low-income, rural residents of the area suffer from food

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insecurity more prevalently. A significant disparity exists between normal and low income households, with low income households being more likely to live further than 30 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store. This means that low-income households are more likely gaining access to food from medium-sized grocery stores or even smaller convenient stores, which according to the study, were found lacking compared to supermarkets in nutritional quality and quantity of food availability (Connell et al., 2007). Data from this study introduces the idea that in order to understand and continue to research food insecurity in the LMD region, it is important to know where individuals and families are obtaining the food that is accessible to them. A current trend in food security research, an interest in identifying the alternate sources (anything outside of purchasing grocery items themselves) from which food insecure individuals and families obtain sustenance and evaluating their effectiveness at combating the issue on both individual and systemic levels, follows logically from findings like Connell's. Identifying and evaluating food assistance programs like food banks, food pantries, nutrition education efforts, etc. helps map the shift in services as these programs evolve alongside the issue of food insecurity. As the issue shifts from a caloric to a nutritional deficit and a transient state to a chronic affliction, efforts to alleviate the struggle have had to evolve from the emergency food services that popped up in the 1960's-1970's to more personalized programs (Martin, 2013).

The research trend of identifying and evaluating programs' processes also allows for government agencies and/or charitable organizations attempting to combat food insecurity to utilize evidence-based methods to support effectiveness in their programs. Megan Christner's research evaluating a school-based food pantry, the first evaluation of

this particular program, serves to confirm that for a newly developed program or service, although it may be considered overall successful in achieving its stated goals, periodic evaluation is crucial in determining weaknesses to be remedied as well as strengths to be duplicated in subsequently developed programs (2014).

Because food insecurity is growing in impact and relevance, more research is being done to understand approaches to combatting it. Barrett (2010) explains in depth the challenges to measuring both the scope of food insecurity as an issue and the impact of intervention techniques due to the innumerable factors involved. There is a significant and diverse body of research simply because approaches to measuring and decreasing food insecurity are so numerous, but gaps in research still exist in identifying specific tactics and how they are used within particular populations. Considering these gaps, additional research is justified to evaluate individual programs in order to determine which tactics are helpful and unhelpful in alleviating food insecurity so that evidence-proven factors may be recreated to serve similar populations and unhelpful factors may be bypassed when developing new food security related programs.

Even with access to a sizable body of research evaluating somewhat related services to use as reference, the leadership board of the meal service program evaluated in this study cannot gain adequate insight into the processes of its program without an outside researcher conducting a program-specific process evaluation. In other words, prior research evaluating like aspects of this meal service program within the process of other programs can be examined, but a gap in research will always exist without an up-to-date process evaluation of this specific program, which considers all aspects of the program, how they layer and otherwise interact, and how the target population perceives

the success of the program. The researcher determined, based on the fact that the program has existed for nearly seven years without being evaluated, that there is significant reason to conduct a process evaluation of this particular meal service program. Given the prevalence of food insecurity in Northeast Mississippi, where the program functions, data collected about the program may also provide further implications and insight with regard to the evolving definition of food insecurity and the people affected by it.

II.   Methods

This study sought to determine and analyze the processes of a meal service program serving a community in Northeast Mississippi, in a county bordering the Lower Mississippi Delta region but not typically considered part of the region (Connell et al., 2007). The program meets weekly at a city community center building for approximately one hour. Guests are welcomed with no requirements for proof of income or residency. Volunteers from churches and other organizations in the surrounding community donate food for the meal, while other volunteers serve food to guests. Volunteers and guests alike are expected to sit down at the community center and eat the meal together for the duration of approximately an hour one night per week, and every other week the adult guests can choose three toiletry items from a stock of donated goods. The program is governed by a nine-person board of directors, all of which are volunteer positions, and is funded primarily by private donations from individuals and organizations. At the time of data collection, the program had been operating for approximately seven years and the mission statement claimed simply that it was a program to serve hot meals and help community residents "get back on their feet."

Because the researcher sought to define and analyze the processes of the meal service program from the perspective of its participants, she chose to employ qualitative research methods, an approach that, by definition, aims to understand phenomena from the point of view of those affected by it (Vaismoradi, 2013). Within the qualitative

approach, the researcher used the method thematic analysis in order to glean meaning

from the study and provide useful information and suggestion for the board members of

the meal service program.

The study takes the form of a process evaluation, which is commonly defined as a

means of assessing the program's potential for impact and indications of success without

necessarily pre-defining determinants of successful implementation (Potter et al., 2011).

Instead, this type of evaluation considers what factors the service recipients (referred to

by this program as "guests"), volunteers, and board members determine to be indicators

of success or weakness of the program and draws conclusions accordingly. The

researcher chose to structure the study as such because process evaluations are well

suited for purposes such as "understanding intervention effects, potential generalizability,

and optimization in routine practice" (Grant et al., 2013). Each of these accepted

purposes of process evaluations is useful in achieving the purpose of this study and, when

determined, could serve as helpful information to the board of the program as it adapts to

meet the food security needs of its guests.

Design

Three primary components serve to collect data in this study: interviews with

program guests, volunteers, and board members, a focus group composed of guests, and

photovoice images produced by guests. These elements serve to triangulate qualitative

data as they offer three distinct perspectives from which to understand the processes of

the meal service program. The researcher received approval from the University of

Mississippi Institutional Review Board under the Abbreviated IRB Application to

conduct each of these research elements on the condition that all human participants were

over the age of 18 years old at the time of participation and no identifying information (name, gender, physical description, etc.) was collected by the researcher or used for research purposes. Additionally, the researcher did not identify the name or exact location of the meal service program to decrease the likelihood that any research participant could be identified by his or her interview, focus group, or photovoice data.

Data Sources

Interviews. Interviews were conducted with 12 program guests, three program volunteers, and three board members. The primary investigator conducted a majority of the interviews, however advisor Dr. Michele Kelly served as a second interviewer in several of the guest interviews. The researcher used semi-structured interview technique for one-on-one interviews with program guests, volunteers and board members, meaning that a predetermined set of questions were asked in each session, but the researcher and interviewee had room to digress and explore responses in detail so that each interview differed to some extent from the original questions (See Appendix A). A semi-structured interview technique was chosen for this study because of its usefulness in allowing subjects to express sentiments that are important to them beyond what the researcher has anticipated (Chadwick et al., 2008), which the researcher valued as she sought to understand the program from the interviewees' perspectives. Another benefit of choosing semi-structured interviews is the method's compatibility with thematic analysis—the more natural style of conversation that results from semi-structured interviews was conducive to the emergence of themes and an open line for communication from the subject without influence from the researcher. The underlying value of using the semi-structured interview for this study was the method's presumption that the subjects must

comprehend questions and their purpose in order to give significant, relevant responses. Therefore the researcher had the freedom to reword and clarify questions for interviewees when necessary.

Focus groups. A focus group made up of program guests served as the second primary research element in this study. The researcher chose to include a focus group as a means of data collection because of its value in collecting honest, non-biased responses by facilitating conversation among participants rather than with the researcher (Qu and Dumay, 2011). The group was composed of nine guests; the primary investigator facilitated the conversation among the guests using the same semi-structured method used in the individual interviews, while a research assistant took field notes. The focus group took place at the program's weekly meal service event, and the participants conversed while eating a meal together. The researcher assigned each participant a number by which each identified him or herself while speaking in order to protect his or her anonymity while still providing a means to differentiate among speakers in the focus group transcription.

Photovoice. The final research element employed in this study was a photovoice project. Photovoice is a qualitative research method that has been gaining in popularity since the 1990's; it is accepted as an unobtrusive avenue for participants to express issues that are important to them, including realities that may be difficult to discuss (Woodgate et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, participants were given a disposable camera and a flexible prompt to take pictures of what they think of when they think of food. Five program guests agreed to participate in the photovoice project, but ultimately only two guests returned their cameras with photos.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited via announcements made by the researcher at the program's weekly meal event. The researcher used a recruitment script (see Appendix B) during the regularly scheduled announcements to address all the guests at once and gave an abbreviated presentation at tables once the guests were seated to offer a more personal invitation to participate in the study. An open invitation was extended to all of the program's board members and regular volunteers to participate in an interview, and the researcher scheduled interviews as the board members and volunteers expressed interest. The researcher interviewed guests on-site at the program's weekly dinner as they expressed interest. Each interviewee signed an informed consent document, which the researcher also verbally explained to each participant, to affirm that he or she was over the age of 18 at the time of participation and that he or she understood the study's purpose, his or her risks and benefits, his or her right to withdraw, a notice of IRB approval, and a statement of consent. (see Appendix C).

The program guests who participated in research serve as a representative sample of the guest population. It is difficult to define the exact demographic of the guests served by this program considering that there is no requirement to prove a need or residency to receive services. However, one can assume by the fact that they are seeking food provision services that they may belong to the 21% of residents of this county in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). At most, 23 guests participated in research (12 interviewees, nine focus group participants, and two photovoice participants), although there may have been overlap in participation. Recruitment was open to and addressed all guests, but the researcher considered diversity when asking guests to participate. Participants' ages

ranged from early 20's to 70's, both men and women were interviewed, and races represented include black, white, and Hispanic.

Data Analysis

In planning, conducting, and analyzing interview and focus group data, the researcher took a localist viewpoint, meaning that the researcher considered the individual interviews and focus group conversation as a "complex social interaction" (Alvesson, 2003). This means that responses from guests, volunteers, and board members must be understood within their social context, taking into account factors like the relationship and dynamic between interviewer and interviewee and the culture of origin of the interviewee. Taking the localist viewpoint allowed the researcher to consider inferences and personal understanding about what an interviewee meant to express as a part of the interview data, rather than strictly considering the words of the responses.

The researcher chose to analyze interview, focus group, and photovoice data via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an emerging method in qualitative research that identifies and links themes that emerge across sets of interviews or other collected data. The term "theme" for the purpose of this study was defined as an "expression of the latent content" that becomes a thread throughout a set of data. In determining the end result of the study, the researcher accepted evidence that recognizing and defining themes is in itself an end product to a thematic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researcher also reasoned to employ thematic analysis because it is functional with most, if not all, methods of qualitative data collection and therefore an appropriate way to synthesize and determine themes within mixed data sources, i.e. the interview, focus group, and photovoice (Thomas, 2008). To analyze the data for themes, the researcher had audio of

interviews and the focus group transcribed by a third party transcriptionist. The researcher began analyzing only when all of the data was transcribed and available for analysis so as not to develop preconceived notions about themes based on only a few of the interviews, photos, or the focus group. After reading through the transcriptions several times, the researcher designated six topics and highlighted each occurrence of the topic in the transcriptions. These topics were actual food needs, social food needs, purely social interaction, outside resources, program specific strengths, and program specific weaknesses. The prevalence of these topics led to the emergence of three themes. The researcher adopted method of thematic analysis from a study by Vaismoradi (2013).

III.   Results

As previously discussed, the end result of a thematic analysis is the recognition and defining of themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In analyzing interview, focus group, and photovoice data, the researcher identified three major themes to serve as an evaluation for the meal service program.

Themes

The first theme is positive social interaction as an indicator of program success. Second is expanding the program's resource offerings as a vision for improvement. The third theme is the program's shift from its foundational purpose to serving its current niche.

Social interaction. The first major theme that the researcher identified within the data is the guests, volunteers, and board members' perception of positive social interaction as an indicator of success. According to the data, social interaction recurs as a theme in guest recruitment and retention and is mentioned by guests as a need more frequently than a need for food. The following quotations from the data set serve to support this theme as it appears throughout the interviews and focus group.

"I just like that the people here are friendly and how they interact with other people and it just…ever since I've been coming here, well at first I was a little shy, but then…I just got to know everyone and I just like meeting new people, and there's always new people here."

"It's set up more like you're going to a gathering of family and friends, that's the impression you get when you come in here. Whether you've been a hundred times or twice, you're treated the same no matter what, and that's the sort of thing I like about it."

Both of these quotes from the focus group are excerpts of a larger conversation about what makes guests comfortable coming to this program and using its resources. Peers agreed with each speaker, noting that other food service programs lacked this positive social interaction, which made them less desirable. Social interaction as a strength and/or benefit of the program is also mentioned at least once in every individual guest interview, but it is best illustrated by this focus group data in which the importance of social interaction is not only brought up but also discussed comfortably among unrelated guests, supporting that some degree of cohesion does exist among guests because of social interaction.

"[This program addresses] the need for companionship; a lot of those people need a companion or someone to talk to, someone just to touch 'em…like [guest's name], he's here for the companionship more than anything, but he could use the food too."

This quote comes from a regular volunteer who serves at most weekly meals and sometimes plays the role of supervisor for other volunteers. Here, positive social interaction can be identified as an indicator of success because of the way the volunteer describes it as an expectation of the program and, in at least one instance, as the most significant provision for a need that is offered to a guest. Although the program classifies itself as one intended to feed a meal to its guests, social interaction, as defined in the

quotation, is the first resource that this volunteer chose to discuss when asked how he or she perceives the program meeting people's needs.

> "We didn't want it to be like a soup kitchen; we wanted it to be a family style meal, so we wanted to sit down [to eat]… we ask the volunteers to go through and then for them to sit too, so we kind of eat together."

This quote comes from a program board member and illustrates that the social interaction described by the focus group participants and volunteers is indeed an intentional aspect of the program that is tied directly to its provision of food. If facilitating positive social interaction is an intention of the program's leadership, then it follows that the existence of this interaction would be considered an indicator of success by the board members and regular volunteers. Throughout the data, the researcher found that program guests not only perceive that positive social interaction exists through the program but also consider it an indicator of program success even though that intention has not been explicitly expressed to them.

Photovoice data also serves to support the existence of this theme. Both participants chose to photograph people at the meal service program as a response to the prompt, "take photos of what you think of when you think about food." The researcher assumes that this indicates an association between food and socialization, at least for these photovoice respondents. Below are examples of such photographs from the photovoice data; Photo 1 shows guests arriving at the program and volunteers waiting to greet them while Photo 2 shows the outside of the building where the weekly meal is held while guests are gathering, waiting to go inside.

Photo 1

Photo 2

Expansion of resource offerings. The second theme that the researcher identified within this data set is a vision for improving the program by expanding resource offerings. The following are quotations from the data that illustrate more varied resources as an existing strength of the program and further expansion of resource offerings as a vision for the program's improvement and future growth.

> "This not only provides a meal for children, it also provides school supplies for the kids whose parents may not be able to provide school products, as well as providing things, household things that they might need around…the house."

This quote came from a focus group participant who was comparing this program to other food service programs that he or she has had experience with in the past. Other participants echoed this sentiment that they appreciate the program because it goes beyond serving a weekly meal, however, the focus group soon became somewhat of a think tank for even more ways that the program could expand in order to be more helpful. Several guests mentioned a greater frequency for meals (twice a week instead of only once) and expanding the service to go through the summer rather than abiding by the school schedule. Another guest began brainstorming about what toiletry items could be helpful to more people.

> "I'm just trying to think of all the things we've tried to address…taxes, formula, diapers, toiletries and things like that…we've known that those were probably going to go hand in hand. And then we've added things like flu shots and we've tried to have speakers from all the different non-profits come and talk…letting them be aware of what else the community has to offer."

This quote is from a board member during an individual interview, and during the interview, he or she speaks in first person plural indicating that he or she is meaning to express the general consensus of the board. Again the researcher sees the theme that

offering a variety of resources is a strength that the program already possesses, and the
board's vision of future expansion is in line with the guests' vision. Following this quote,
the board member goes on to describe how the board addresses needs as they arise and
how those conversations lead to program growth.

> "We'll notice that…some of the kids don't have coats and stuff, so we'll
> ask the churches and some of the sororities and fraternities to donate
> jackets and clothes. We've had doctors and nurses come up just to give
> check-ups and flu shots, and then people have been asking about taxes so
> we had a financial advisor come up and help with taxes too. So we just
> kind of recruit from all over [town]."

This quote comes from a regular volunteer, who has served at every weekly meal
for nearly two years. This volunteer, like the board member, describes the ways in which
the program has expanded without explicitly identifying the additional resources as
program growth but instead describes it as a program norm. The volunteer's
understanding of program expansion as a way to best meet the guests' needs echoes the
board member's explanation; both quotations seem to define the program as a brokering
service, which makes connecting guests to outside resources a new component of this
program itself.

Shift from foundational purpose. The third theme that the researcher identified
is that the program's purpose has progressively shifted since its conception from its
foundational intent to serve its current niche. The researcher observed this theme
primarily by noting the board members' perception of the program's intended purpose as
compared to their description of the practical functioning of the program as well as the
guest's perception of the program's purpose. Again, the following quotes are pulled from
the data set and discussed in order to support the presence of the theme.

"The Chamber of Commerce got together with the food pantry…and they decided that hungry people, homeless and/or transient people were a big issue in our town. The food pantry allows you to pull once a month, if you qualify, but it's only once a month so we were seeing a need for people to have food more often…and we started once a week during the school year every single week."

Here a board member is describing the inciting event in 2007 that ultimately launched this program, which is still functioning today on the same weekly schedule, in the same location, and by the same name. He or she continued to explain that in the second year of the program, bi-weekly toiletries had become a regular component of the program, and by the third year the program began dedicating volunteers to serve as tutors for kids who were attending the weekly meal. In this progression, one can see that the services of this program have shifted from their original intent to supplement the food pantry in combatting hunger. The researcher also made note that the program's creation came out of a conversation about members of the transient and homeless community, and board members implied through their interviews that this population was the original target of the program's services. In slight contrast, the following quote from another board member illustrates a different reality in terms of the population being served by the program.

"[The criteria for guests coming in is] that they want to be there. No criteria at all; it's open to everybody and we welcome anybody coming."

The board member who explained this "all-are-welcome" policy went on to indicate that the program, as it currently functions, still aims to provide services to those who are in need of them, but he or she also went into detail to express his or her desire for volunteers and other community members to share in the food resources and have a meal with the guests and, "find out how we're all alike." According to data from guest

interviews and the focus group, those receiving the services also have the perception that the program is not targeted at the homeless population.

> "I was very shy about coming [because] I'm not on food stamps, I'm not receiving any kind of government assistance, but we still do struggle. It was kind of hard because some people might think of this as, I'm putting myself in a charity situation, but it's not just a charity situation; it's a chance to get to spend time with my grandchildren and my son and daughter-in-law."

In this quotation from the focus group, a guest brings up a sentiment that was quickly echoed by his or her peers—they perceive this program as one that is available as a resource they can access even if they do not consider themselves people in need of "charity" given that they do not have to prove income or financial need in order to participate. It would appear that the program has found a sizable niche of community members to serve, as volunteers and board members expect anywhere from 50-100 guests at each weekly meal, but first person accounts from guests reveal that the population the program is serving does not necessarily match the target population considered in the program's foundational purpose.

Photovoice data is also relevant to this theme in that it gives the researcher insight to the food security of the guests who submitted the photos. Some of the photos depict a garden (Photo 3) and a sink full of vegetables (Photo 4), suggesting that the photographer has a home garden and is likely not facing homelessness. Other photos depict scenes from a restaurant suggesting that the guest does have means for other sources of food (Photo 5). The photos seem to support the theme that the program's services are shifting from the original purpose of addressing the needs of individuals in the homeless and transient population, however the researcher's interpretation of the photovoice data is assumptive and inherently incomplete.

Photo 3

Photo 4

IV.   Discussion

Theme one: perception of positive social interaction as an indicator of success

Individuals and groups involved in this meal service program (guests, volunteers, and board members alike) view positive social interaction as an indicator of success for the program. The researcher asserts that the existence of this theme is significant in ensuring guest recruitment and regularity, further contributing to the overall success of the program. Nine out of the 12 guests interviewed responded that they learned about the weekly meal service program from a family member or friend who invited them personally. The researcher assumes based on this sample that approximately 75% of guests are involved with the program because of a social interaction with someone who has already been involved in some capacity, who, as it would appear, is inviting others because he or she is satisfied with the social interaction he or she is experiencing at the program.

Considering implications of this theme as an evaluation of the meal service program, the researcher determined that this theme is an indicator that the program is positioned to make a positive social impact on the community it serves. A structured, communal evening meal is still held as a cultural norm, even if it may be better defined as a societal ideal (Mestdag, 2005), and for individuals who may lack other indicators of stability in their lives, those who deal with food insecurity in particular, an opportunity to adhere to a cultural expectation regarding meals serves to benefit them. Additionally, the

prevalence of this theme within the data implies that social interaction takes precedent

over food provision in the eyes of many involved in the program. From an evaluation

standpoint, the researcher determined that the program might need to redefine itself as

primarily a socialization program or intentionally place more emphasis on determining

and providing for its guests' food needs.

Meal service programs of a similar scale exist which prioritize socialization as a

goal with the same or greater emphasis as food service. For instance, the FEAST (Friends

Easting and Socializing Together) program in Michigan (Kaszubski, 2017) and the

Dinner Bell program in Shelter Island, New York (Lomuscio, 2015) both aim to improve

the health and outlook of low-income senior citizens through primarily socialization but

also intentionally serve nutritious meals. For these groups, part of defining themselves as

a socialization program involves creating an atmosphere that is more like a family-style

setting, foregoing a buffet line for a plated meal served to the table. Although both of

these programs are directed at serving senior citizens, their concepts of socialization as a

service could easily transfer and be applied to the meal service program here evaluated. If

it is not the will of the program's leadership to define the program as one that provides

socialization as a service, it follows that the program should instead be more intentional

about determining and meeting the food needs of its guests, including the quantity and

nutritional quality of food, because presently, the guests see socialization as the primary

purpose and benefit of the program.

Theme two: a vision of program improvement by expanding resource offerings

Agreement exists among program guests, volunteers, and board members that the

program is positioned to expand, both in its own resource offering and its potential for

connecting guests to other resources. Through the lens of evaluation, the researcher

determined that the program is successful in acting as a community resource broker, a

common role of social work agencies. However, the program is in a beginning stage of

becoming a resource broker, as its leadership has not intentionally defined it as such.

Foster's research about religious congregations as resource brokers (2014) is particularly

applicable to this program because of its reliance on churches and religious organizations

for donations and volunteers. Foster notes that the most effective way to increase social

capital is to form relationships outside of close, kinship relationships, something that the

program's board members already intend to do via weekly meals, and create resource

connections that include things like financial advice, health care, and child enrichment,

all genres of resources that this program has been linked to in the past. Foster (2014) also

writes under the assumption that social capital is increased through personal relationships

in addition to agencies, so long as the connection forms a heterogeneous resource pool.

In order to capitalize on its prime positioning to become a resource broker, the

program should intentionally identify itself as a resource broker to volunteers who can, in

turn, be purposeful in building relationships that might allow them to make use of their

personal resources. Also, the program should forge stronger connections with any agency

that partners with the program so that the program can operate from a reliable list of

partner agencies to which guests can be referred for services.

Theme three: a progressive shift from foundational purpose to current niche

The purpose of this program has progressively shifted from its foundational intent

to supplement the food pantry in feeding members of the homeless and/or transient

population to its current niche of providing food and social interaction to individuals with

a range of stability with regard to economic and social capital. From an evaluation standpoint, the researcher determined that the program's current niche is indeed meeting the needs of a substantial population, but it remains unclear whether this gradual shift was intentional or calculated. When interviewed, neither board members nor regular volunteers were able to recall the program's mission statement or speak to specific goals toward which the program is working. In fact, when board members and volunteers did give an answer to the question about specific goals, they more often described a personal vision for the program that did not match that of the other respondents. For instance, one board member explained increasing the number of guests as a goal for the program while another stated that attendance is high and the physical location of the program is at capacity.

Although allowing the program to progressively shift in purpose has not necessarily made the program an ineffective resource, looking toward the future, the leadership of the program should clearly define the program's mission and goals to ensure that any change in purpose intentional and calculated. Keeling (2013) notes that regularly revisiting a mission statement holds two benefits: first it facilitates discussions that cause leaders to use clear, specific language that leads to a greater collective understanding of the program's purpose, and second, regularly re-crafting the mission statement communicates to those outside the program the leadership's commitment to appropriately meeting the community's needs. Also, program donors and volunteers should be made aware of the program's mission and goals so that, as the program's most numerous mobilizers, they can work to forward the program's purpose.

Limitations

Limitations exist within this research that may have affected the themes that arose within the data. First, one must consider that, according to the localist perspective, interview data is understood as a complex social interaction between the interviewee and not as a conduit for directly receiving data (Alvesson, 2003). One consideration in particular is the potential for hesitation to offer full disclosure in the relationship between a program guest and the interviewer. Every program guest indicated that he or she appreciated the social aspect of the program and spent more time and emphasis on social enjoyment than he or she spent explaining his or her food needs. This directly led to the emergence of the theme of social interaction as an indicator of success, however one might consider that in a face-to-face interview with a stranger, and individual may be hesitant to disclose that he or she is affected by food insecurity. Taking a localist perspective to analyzing interviews, the researcher does take into account that the truth of an interview may be unspoken and exist under the surface (Qu and Dumay, 2011), but this aspect of qualitative analysis relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation and therefore presents itself as a limitation to research.

A second limitation exists in the researcher's capacity to properly employ photovoice as a research tool. With only two respondents, the photos can be considered along with the rest of the data set in order to look for emerging themes, but on its own the photovoice data is inconclusive. Because the researcher sought to understand food insecurity and this program's effect on it from the perspective of the program guests, photovoice was a natural choice because it is accepted as a relatively unobtrusive way for

an individual to let a researcher into his or her world (Woodgate et al., 2017). However, one of the most important considerations in choosing to employ photovoice is whether or not an individual is willing to participate and whether the process would be burdensome to the individual. In two semesters of observing the program and recruiting participants, the researcher was only able to find five guests who agreed to join the photovoice project. The researcher inferred that the population of guests was not willing to participate and that the three guests who did not return their cameras found the project to be too burdensome.

Third, the researcher met a limitation in achieving her initial intent of determining the program's effectiveness due to the fact that the program did not have a measurable mission statement or goals that the researcher could compare to the data outcomes. Additionally, the program updated its mission statement during data collection, before the researcher analyzed data. Given this change and the researchers findings that the program's leadership and volunteers are not working toward a measurable goal, the researcher determined that the results of evaluating effectiveness would be inconclusive and less helpful than completing a descriptive thematic analysis in the form of a process evaluation.

V.   Recommendations

The researcher has so far mentioned several concrete suggestions for program improvement based on evaluation results. This section serves to clearly define and expound upon those suggestions in order for this process evaluation to benefit the program in the future. These recommendations are based on results of the process evaluation as well as direct statements of goals and visions to the researcher from the program's leadership.

First, the program should capitalize on social interaction as its strength and unique quality as compared to other supplemental meal options. Social interaction has served the program in that word-of-mouth is recruiting guests and relationships formed and supported at the program keep guests coming. In order to intentionally capitalize on this benefit, the program could host a "bring a friend" event, during which regular guests are encouraged to invite at least one person that he or she thinks should come to the program. This action item would serve to work toward the goal mentioned by board members of increasing guest numbers and utilizing the surplus of volunteers.

Second, the program should define itself as a resource-brokering agency and, for that purpose, forge intentional relationships with other community resources. The program already has partnerships with groups or agencies that may serve as periodic guest speakers or irregular volunteers, but the program would be better positioned to serve its guests if it had clearly defined partnerships with groups or agencies to which they could refer guests in need. Practically, this would involve the board coming together

to determine in writing the terms of a partnership with each group or agency to outline the expectations of that relationship as well as a title for it (i.e. "community partner" or "partner agency") that can be publicized. Strong community partnerships may also lead to expanded opportunities for this program such as purpose specific grants or other alternate sources of funding and donations. Because the influence of partner agencies makes non-profits such as this program more susceptible to "mission drift" (Hawkins, 2014), the researcher's third recommendation will be a vital counterpart to becoming a resource broker.

Third, the program should develop (and regularly re-develop) its mission statement and goals so that it functions toward an intentional purpose. Practically, this looks like determining a frequency at which the board will re-visit the program's purpose, mission, and goals, be it annually, bi-annually, or however often the board feels the discussion would best serve the program. The researcher also suggests that the board members gather feedback from guests about their needs in order to inform the design of short-term and long-term program goals; feedback could be gathered via written or verbal surveys administered at weekly meals. As a part of the regular development and defining of the program's purpose, mission, and goals, the program's board should ensure that all donors and volunteers are aware of these concepts so that the program will function as the leadership intends. This could be achieved via a required volunteer orientation before an individual can serve as a volunteer or simply through a written or verbal communication of the specific mission and goals of the program to each volunteer upon signing up.

Implications.

The researcher determined implications from this study to apply to the existing body of research on food insecurity. The colloquial definition of food insecurity implies imagery of extreme poverty, however data from this study offers the alternative that individuals may perceive themselves as food insecure even if they do not consider themselves in need of charity or financial assistance. This study also provides implication for future research in that it analyzes an intervention to combat food insecurity that is alternate simply providing the necessary food, adding to the existing body of research and providing a starting point for a more directed study in the future. Within a more specific realm of implication, this study provides a starting point for a future evaluation of this meal service program if its leadership chooses to follow the researchers recommendation of creating a measurable mission statement and set of goals.

Conclusions.

Through this process evaluation, the researcher finds that the meal service program is positioned to continue making a positive impact on the population affected by food insecurity in the Northeast Mississippi county in which it operates. The researcher defines three major themes within the data set: social interaction as an indicator of success, expansion of resources as a vision for the future, and a shift from the program's foundational purpose. Each of these themes expresses a strength as well as a path for improvement as the program continues. The first theme speaks to socialization as a major strength of the program, as perceived by guests, volunteers, and board members, but the researcher suggests that the program's leadership intentionally identify the program as one that provides socialization so that that purpose can be more easily measured in the

future. The second theme speaks to the willingness of the program staff to meet the varied needs of the guests and the guests' trust in the program to meet their needs. The researcher suggests that the program's leadership capitalize on this common vision and work to establish the program as a resource broker by establishing close partnerships with other social service agencies. The final theme speaks to the adaptability of the program and the niche population it has come to serve, but the researcher suggests a more frequent revisiting of the program's mission and purpose so as to avoid mission drift in the future.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A

1. **Board Members:**
    a. Can you tell me about [this program]?
        i. History?
        ii. Did you identify a need? What need? How?
        iii. How did you originally envision this need being met in the community?
        iv. Dow did you develop programs/services to meet this need?
        v. Was [this program] modeled after other programs? In this community?
        vi. How was it initially implemented?
    b. What is your vision and mission?
    c. What are the goals (to ultimately meet needs) of this program/service?
    d. What are the criteria for receiving these services? Thus your targets are...?
    e. How are your targets made aware of your services?
    f. How many people receive your services weekly? How many *regularly* receive your services? (3-4 times a month)
    g. Have you notices patterns in utilization? (Busier at certain times of the month/year?)
    h. Are those currently receiving services your intended targets?
    i. Are there targets who are not receiving services?
    j. How is the program organized and coordinated?
    k. Has the program changed since it was originally implemented? How?
    l. Do your clients have other needs that you are aware of (that the program did not initially target)?
    m. How do you address other needs?
    n. How is [this program] successful? (successful=making steps to diminish the need that it sought out to fill)
    o. Strengths/weaknesses?
    p. What are the future plans for [this program]?

2. **Volunteers/food providers:**
    a. How were you recruited to volunteer?
    b. What is your perception of community needs that [this program] is meeting?
    c. Do you know the vision, mission, and goals of [this program]?
    d. What do you see your role as?

    e.   How do you assist in meeting the clients' food needs? Other needs?
    f.   What strengths and weaknesses do you see in this program?

3. **Study Participants:**
    a. Tell me about your food needs?
    b. How did you become aware of the services at [this program?
    c. What were your expectations before you came?
    d. How long have you participated in [this program]?
    e. Does this program meet your food needs? How?
    f. Are you satisfied with the services you receive here?
    g. What other services could help you meet your food needs?
    h. What strengths/weaknesses do you see in the program?

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Script

My name is Grace Sullivan; I am a student doing research at the University of Mississippi. Over the next several weeks, I will be doing research at [this program] to figure out ways to make it the best that it can be.

I will need help from about 10 people who participate in [this program] in order to do this. The people who volunteer to help me will just need to let me interview them for about 15 minutes and help me with a photo project. I have a disposable camera for all my participants, and I'll ask you to take a picture of one of your meals each day for three weeks. At the end of those three weeks we'll have a focus group all together.

Everything you say in your interviews and all of your photos are completely confidential. My hope is that this research with help [this program] become the best it can be and meet [this city and county's] needs. I'll be here for the rest of the evening; if you are interested in participating or have any further questions please feel free to come talk to me.

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Title: Process Evaluation of a food serving and socialization program

Investigator	**Advisor**
Grace Sullivan, undergrad	Michele Kelly, Ph.D.
Department of Social Work	Department of Social Work
Longstreet Hall	Longstreet Hall
The University of Mississippi	The University of Mississippi
(601) 940-8071	(662) 915-7336

Description
This is a process evaluation of a food serving and socialization program. The research will consist of interviews with the program's board members, volunteers, and participants. Additionally, approximately ten (10) participants will be asked to take part in a Photovoice project in which they will be provided with a disposable camera and asked to document their primary meal each day for three (3) weeks.

Risks and Benefits
Participants in the study can expect to spend approximately 15-20 minutes being interviewed and/or approximately one (1) hour participating in a focus group. Some questions about personal relationships with food may be uncomfortable for some participants, but no questions are required to be answered.

Confidentiality
No information disclosed in interviews or focus groups will be shared outside the realm of this study. No descriptions of names or physical likeness (including age, appearance, etc.) will be needed for this study, so your participation in this research will not be identifiable. Interviews and focus group may be audio recorded for the sake of attaining accurate information, but no identifiers will be associated with the recordings or quotations used in the study.

Right to Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If

you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Ms. Sullivan or Dr. Kelly in person, by letter, or by telephone (contact information listed above). You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer during interviews or focus groups

IRB Approval
This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent
I have read and understand the above information. By completing the survey/interview I consent to participate in the study and confirm that I am 18 years of age or older.

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Date