

BACKPACK 2 SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Having identified the inequities of the achievement gap that exist in Title 1 schools, the Backpack 2 School program's mission is to make a positive impact in the lives of youth, families and educators in uniting community support to (1) excite kids about starting the school year and their education with a carnival; (2) relieve financial pressures on parents and teachers by providing each student with necessary school supplies; (3) assist the schools with registration for increased preparedness; and (4) encourage community members to take an active investment in the well-being of their neighborhood. Developed in Tucson, Arizona over the last five years, Salt Lake City, Utah's first annual event premiered in August 2009 at Mountain View Elementary School. The project was a success on each level, and with the creation of the Backpack 2 School Project Manual, it may continue to be hosted, coordinated and carried to completion in Salt Lake County as well as other locations across the United States.

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Backpack 2 School began in Tucson, Arizona, under the direction of GAP Ministries, with the desire to provide for communities that have a hard time beginning the school year with the necessary supplies. They sought to give every elementary child a backpack filled with paper, pencils, crayons, markers, scissors, notebooks and folders so they would feel ready to start the new school year focused on their education and not their inequities. In 2005, they held their first campus carnival and backpack giveaway at one local elementary school serving over 1,000 children. In 2006, they continued to grow, adopting 7 schools reaching 5,000 students and the following year they achieved 11 schools and almost 7,000 kids. Tucson's program is growing annually to eventually sponsor all 80,000 children in Title 1 elementary schools in their city. The directors, Pam and Greg Ayers, expressed their hope to see the vision catch fire and broaden its scope nationally.

DiverCity, a locally run nonprofit in Salt Lake City, was inspired by this model and decided to host its inaugural event alongside Tucson's fifth annual success in 2009. The founder and president, Alfred Murillo proposed this option to me when I was soliciting project ideas, as I had already been volunteering with DiverCity and its sister organization, the Utah Dream Center. We decided that the local Title 1 elementary school was both in need and a supporter of other program initiatives already on the school

campus. We sponsored nearly 600 students and hope to eventually reach all 21 Title 1 elementary schools in Salt Lake. The creation of a project manual is a sustainable effort to make it accessible to all cities wishing to institute this program.

As a Cultural Anthropology and International Studies major, with a minor in Leadership Studies, I could not have chosen a more relevant issue to address. My interest in anthropology lies in racial and class inequalities that surface in and between cultures, attempting to dissect and address them at large with awareness, education, empowerment and focused change efforts.

Glendale is considered a Salt Lake suburb of working class minority individuals and characterized by outsiders to be plagued with crime, gang violence, teen pregnancies, and a large non-English speaking migrant population. However, I reside in the neighborhood and it is a wonderful place to live. It is vibrant, colorful, safe and full of excellent food. The positive qualities need to be promoted just as the negative issues need to be changed. This project was a chance to do both.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fall season comes around signaling to many families that it is time to send kids back to school. Small children have grown out of their clothes and shoes, parents need to purchase items on the school's supply list, and principals are busily preparing for the next year by registering kids, hiring teachers and organizing classroom space. This can be a stressful time for everyone involved: kids who are not ready for summer to end, parents who can't afford the expense, teachers who need to find ways of providing for unprepared children, and principals who can't seem to get families to come on registration day. Not having adequate numbers on registration day can set a school back weeks, with the realization that when all the kids come during the first week of class, the school has either hired too few or too many teachers and has to reorganize the space and budget accordingly.

Investment in school and education can be costly to low-income households with elementary-aged children, with just the initial school supplies required costing an average of \$20-\$50 per child (Sexton, 2008, p.1). Often, parents are unable to provide for this expense, and teachers usually end up purchasing additional supplies for their students out of their own pockets, an average of \$511 annually for elementary teachers according to a study conducted in 1995 (Goodnough, 2002, p.1).

Need is particularly strong in poorer neighborhoods, where family incomes are lower and school classrooms may not be as well stocked for teachers. Schools that meet

federal requirements may be deemed Title 1, of which there are 21 Title 1 Elementary schools in Salt Lake City as of 2009. The Title 1 program is a "federal commitment to close the achievement gap between low-income and other students" in order to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (USDE, 2009). A few of the stated initiatives directed at this aim include requiring standardized assessments, improving school and state accountability, and distributing an average of \$7 billion to schools at risk of failure or near poverty-level (Green, 2009).

The National School Lunch Program was established by President Harry Truman in 1946 to subsidize nutritional lunches for eligible schools and children based on financial need. At least forty percent of the school's student population must be enrolled in this lunch program in order for a school to be considered Title 1 (USDA, 2009). Despite these monetary investments, many schools, teachers and families still lack adequate funding to ensure the elimination of this achievement gap. Family socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and racial or ethnic differences are relevant factors.

Equipping youth with the tools of education is a promising strategy for developing positive self-esteem, delinquency prevention, and investing in the well-being of our community. If the strengths of youth can be aligned with the strengths of families, schools, and communities—for instance, the capacities of adults to provide for young people a nurturing, positive milieu in which their strengths may be honed and enhanced—then young people may be resources for the healthy development of themselves and of others (Lerner, 2004). Utah's Attorney General Mark Shurtleff expresses his desire to see local at-risk youth transformed from community liabilities to

community assets. "America's greatness is rooted in the spirit of community and volunteerism," says Shurtleff. "With today's threats of war and terrorism, the greatest concern for America's future comes from within our own borders. Crime, drugs and gang violence threaten our youth. The single greatest protection comes through a positive role model intervening in a young life."

Neighborhood members who bring a sense of excitement to education and school starting at a young age provide protective factors for youth as preventative method to alternative delinquent options. Several juvenile justice researchers have linked risk factors to delinquency (Hawkins et al., 1998; Lipsey and Derzon, 1998), and many have also noted a multiplicative effect if several risk factors are present. Salt Lake youth rate among the highest at-risk and least protected counties in the state, particularly high in areas for alcohol and drugs, antisocial behaviors, and gambling. The domains in need of most help are community and peer/individual (Utah Criminal Justice Center, 2007). This "risk-focused prevention" strategy identifies risk factors and introduces protective factors at the earliest possible time to reduce and counter risks (Hawkins and Catalano, 1992).

PROCEDURE

Setting the Date

After approval from Principal Erlacher was received, a meeting in May was set up to make acquaintances and discuss project details. The date was set for August 12th on their designated registration date from 8:00 am to 7:00 pm, with the carnival from 5:30 pm to 7:00pm. Principal Erlacher described his need for an incentive such as this to aid in his preparation for the school year, which helped the planning team articulate and promote some benefits of the initiative.

Team Selection

Word of mouth, presentation and personal contact were the methods used to recruit core team members.

Action Plan and Timeline

As a Service Learning requirement, an action plan was developed early on in April to process and layout goals and objectives for the following few months. Although the timeline was a very inaccurate estimation, formulating a rough plan with detailed project components proved to be a valuable tool.

Marketing and Communications

Tucson had already developed logos and other promotional material, which were

acquired in digital copies via email. Report cards were to be going home the second week in June, so the Marketing Communications Manager created a bilingual flyer that would be inserted into the student's take home packet. This was a great solution to avoid the time and cost of stamps and addresses. That same format and content was then modified into a large banner that would go on the outside fence of the school playground, to further promote the event to the neighborhood. Through a team member's connection with the pastor of Adventure Church, the banners were printed at cost.

Next, the project needed an online presence to verify our professional and credible efforts. Considering DiverCity did not yet have its own website, the Marketing Communications Manager got to work developing one to post announcements and information about the project. This took several months ongoing, and the website as a whole is not yet complete. It was certainly valuable to have a website address for business cards, promotional emails and material. Additionally, it was a place where people could visit after the project to view photos (see utahdivercity.org).

The Public Relations Specialist crafted a press release, community release, financial sponsorship proposal, food sponsorship proposal and local services invitation for distribution. Due to timing and other urgent tasks, they were unfortunately not utilized to their full potential.

Meanwhile, we had two individuals organizing a Golf Tournament Fundraiser, and so the Marketing Communications Manager developed a promotional flyer.

DiverCity business cards for the Program Director and Marketing Communications Manager were also made for professionalism and function.

For the final neighborhood reminder the weekend before the event, postcards were designed to go to each student. Six hundred exceptional postcards were printed at the University Printing Services. Principal Erlacher shared his preference to distribute them door to door since the student population is within walking distance.

And finally, a “Thank You Sponsors” banner was designed listing each group that donated items or funds to make the project possible. The banner completed printing the day of the event and I sent a volunteer to pick it up, arriving just before 7 pm when the director announced the carnival’s end. He requested everyone present to surround and hold up the banner for a photo opportunity. Many of the kids participated in the photo, making the trouble to get the banner worthwhile. This banner was given to Mountain View Elementary to hang inside their school for the next few weeks.

Finance

Budget:

Tucson was able to provide a copy of their current budget (servicing 11,000 students), and some rough estimates for what it would cost for Salt Lake’s first year. Despite having these numbers, it was difficult to determine a budget for our specific project.

Fundraisers:

The Dream Center hosts an annual Fourth of July water-balloon celebration, and a few years ago it was so successful that the city requested to combine the two. They offered financial donations to the center in exchange for volunteers. This year, after

paying his volunteers a small percentage, the remaining funds went to help sponsor the project.

A golf tournament fundraiser was put on the last few years as a fundraiser for the Dream Center. This summer's tournament, the Dream Center chose to dedicate the funds to Backpack 2 School. The planners decided to hold the tournament at the Glendale Golf Course as another form of supporting a neighborhood business. In order to have enough notice for promotion, they pushed back the initial date from a Saturday in July to Friday August 7th.

Donations:

The first donation came from the Rotary Club of American Fork, where the DiverCity director had made a presentation on the project. As luck would have it, they happened to have 350 backpacks filled with school supplies they intended to donate overseas. Instead of shipping them, the club decided to contribute to our program. This initial victory in early May gave the team confidence that community support would come.

New Hope International Church sponsored the upfront funds to begin purchasing remaining items. An account titled "Backpack 2 School" was set up so that the money had a deposit location and checks could easily be written. Due to time constraints, no checks or debit cards were ordered.

Capital Church in the City is very involved with the other initiatives at the Dream Center and DiverCity. The Director of Ministries, Tara Ross, requested a list of possible sponsorship items. From the categorized needs list, she chose the most expensive item,

being the remaining 312 backpacks.

Orders:

DiverCity's lawyer provided copies of the 501 (c) 3 tax exempt status letter for purchasing supplies to be distributed to the Orders Team. A list of school supplies matching Tucson's and approved by Principal was retrieved and researching the best deals began the last week in July. All supplies were stored in a room at the Dream Center.

Principal Erlacher had approximately 600 pencil bags suited with scissors, a ruler, chap-stick, pen and pencil along with a pack of loose leaf paper. Since all school supplies were already purchased or donated, these were initially going to be saved for next year.

As for backpacks, a GAP employee in Tucson was able to arrange for Salt Lake the same reduced prices with her backpack vendor, receiving them straight from China. She emailed her order invoice to reference the styles they purchased to help scale our order down to size. The order was completed in late July, taking only a week or so to ship.

The two team members researching food supplies found that most grocery stores required a formal request on the organization's letterhead. The Public relations Specialist developed this piece, however in the end no grocery stores were able to give any special deals on late notice. They recommended beginning this process at least a month in advance, and so the team waited until the day of the event to make the purchases to avoid needing freezer space. They ended up purchasing quite a bit more than necessary and the remaining food was donated to the Dream Center.

Arrangements were made in a happenstance meeting at the County Fair with the owner of Carnival 2 Go for a free donation of the snow cone, cotton candy and popcorn machines. Upon picking up the machines, they unexpectedly donated nearly all of the needed food supplies.

With a long-time relationship, DiverCity director contracted with Fun Services to get an excellent deal on 4 great obstacle course inflatables for the evening. They provide their own employees to man the lines, which was a great bonus to keep the kids under control, and liability out of our hands.

Last minute emergency:

The Friday before Wednesday's event, the program coordinator discovered that the Rotary Club's donated backpacks were used and unacceptable for the celebration. They were not new backpacks and supplies as promised. That night, a visiting volunteer group to the Dream Center sorted the boxes for any usable materials. Out of the 350 backpacks promised, only 116 passed inspection and very few miscellaneous supplies were salvaged. That same day, an individual called to express interest in contributing to the project in some way. Upon learning about the urgent situation at hand, he confirmed on Saturday his donation of \$3,250.

Saturday was spent tallying what supplies we had in order to determine the remaining need and expense. On Sunday, the remaining supplies were purchased, still at excellent prices. Instead of rush shipping additional backpacks, the team filled our 485 backpacks, and purchased school supplies for 600. The program coordinator contacted Principal Erlacher with the change of plans and requested use of his pencil bags and loose

leaf paper after all. The Marketing Communications Manager created a checklist and vouchers so that volunteers could record the names of the students who did not receive a backpack, to instead turn in their voucher on the first day of school where it would be waiting with their teacher.

Shortly after Wednesday's event, the second round of backpacks were ordered, filled, labeled and dropped off at Mountain View Monday morning for the principal to distribute. Ordering was not yet over since a week or so later roughly 40 backpacks were returned with broken zippers. We had encountered this earlier during the fills and give-away. They were replaced at no cost.

The remaining donated backpacks that were not in suitable condition for the event were distributed through the community by the Dream Center with the excess supplies, raising our total population served with backpacks to about 650 students.

August 12th Registration and Carnival

Beginning at 8 am there were long lines and about 50 families already registering first thing in the morning. After the first chaotic hour, things were settling and finding a comfortable routine. Volunteers maintained their posts and the Program Coordinator alternated from station to station. We ran out of backpacks around 2:30 pm and began distributing vouchers without any problems from families.

The food was purchased that afternoon by the Orders Team and volunteers help set up the carnival. Everything went smoothly - the families enjoyed the food, live performance, inflatables and games.

Towards the end we turned on the dj music with Michael Jackson, the Cha-cha slide and other popular hits. The kids loved it and broke out dancing together, some were break dancing, and people gathered to watch. Principal Erlacher gave a thank you speech and we directed everyone who was willing to take a picture with the sponsor banner. Families started to file out around 7 pm and we took an hour and a half to get snow cones to our volunteers, leisurely cleaning up and bringing the remaining supplies to the Dream Center, finishing the evening by 9 pm.

Follow-up

Personalized cards were sent to thank all donors and a mass email was sent to show appreciation to all volunteers. The core team was invited to a debriefing potluck.

RESULTS

Marketing

In measuring the success of the marketing component, the overarching outcome was achieved - everything that needed to be communicated was communicated. As far as outputs are concerned, marketing was successful in creating materials that needed to be created.

Despite the end result being achieved, the process was less than perfect. Timing was the greatest barrier to efficiency, with backlogs in design and printing. Material was produced upon learning that it was needed rather than having foresight and being prepared in advance. Communication was usually urgent and incomplete when identifying needs and purposes of materials. Some were not used to their full potential, such as the financial and food sponsorship proposal letters as well as the local services invitation.

The neighborhood and volunteers were well notified of the event, however marketing could have expanded and reached other target audiences more effectively, such as sponsors, local businesses, and media. No media were present for the event, despite a press release being sent to 5 locations (City Weekly, Salt Lake Tribune, Deseret News, Fox 13, and KSL). Few local businesses were contacted for support, and financial

backing came from only a few sources.

Yet, much marketing material is available for next year's use and early distribution, now leaving time for additional pieces to be developed. For example, the photos and video recordings are being edited to create a promotional video (both short and extended versions).

Finance

Backpack 2 School was able to raise a total of \$6,852.00 and the final cost \$5,359.33. Financial contributions made to BP2S, with nearly 50% coming from one individual, and over 40% coming from 2 churches. Costs are graphed below:

Carnival food was over estimated, and could have been cut down significantly. Cotton Candy, Snow Cone and Popcorn supplies were donated, along with partial food amounts.

Of the donated items required to be in each backpack, the estimated value is \$939.16. Many more miscellaneous items were donated and used as prizes for carnival games. All remaining school supplies were distributed throughout the neighborhood by the Dream Center.

Volunteer hours and gas mileage were not tallied this year, but should make steps to incorporate in evaluations for next year. These two categories would likely total an impressive amount. There were approximately 70 volunteers total.

In summation, the project was able to serve approximately 650 youth with

backpacks and required school supplies, and over 80% of Mountain View's student population were registered on the desired date. Children were able to come to their school and enjoy the atmosphere of a carnival on their school campus the week before classes began.

REFLECTION

Having had the experience of completing this project, I learned an extensive amount about program directing, the importance of contacts and networking, my leadership style, and the components necessary for sustainability.

Program directing is not an easy assignment, because one has to know every detail at all times to have a grasp on the process, flow, costs and requirements. I had to think ahead of myself, and try to pull together all the minute components without any prior experience. Finding a dedicated team was difficult, however once volunteers surfaced, delegation was easier. I would like to have had a more thorough evaluation process to sum up the event, since most team members dropped responsibility after the last backpacks were sent.

Nearly all team members, donors and contractors were involved through a personal connection with myself or someone else on the team. This reinforces that old adage, "It's all about who you know." The only way I could have pulled the project together was through these networks – with time and shoe leather.

Having minored in leadership studies at the University, I feel pretty comfortable in general with my capabilities to lead. I took the approach as a team member and collaborator, and tried to make it as pleasant and fun of an experience as possible, since they were volunteering their time. Learning how to manage head-strong and aggressive team members was difficult since I am fairly laid back in my personal style, choosing not

to be demanding, but instead balance project goals with relationship building.

Finally, the most time consuming aspect was not the preparation or execution of the event, rather the documentation. I now understand why documentation is a common weakness for nonprofits. Developing a descriptive narrative, statistics, and recommendations are critical to furthering the success of the project. I certainly underestimated the time investment this would require and eventually stopped recording my hours. However, with the manual and annual report completed, I hope to pass the project on to another program coordinator for next year.

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