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Collaborating with Community Partners to Develop Specialized Programs for Underserved Populations

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: Names of participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

Do what you do best, and partner for the rest! – Nancy Arsenault

“This is magic” sighed Asal, as she gazed upon the glimmering Atlantic Ocean from a cliffside. Asal and her young family moved to Canada only 3 years ago. She is the primary caregiver to her two children, both under the age of three. Asal does not have a driver’s licence and her husband works full-time to support the family. She spent most of her days tending to the children and had not been able to meet others or explore her new home. She had reached out eagerly in the hope of claiming a spot in a free hiking program being offered. For Asal to participate, a lot of logistical planning was involved from both her side, as well as that of the program coordinator.

Project Hike was a 6-week guided hiking program developed in partnership with Memorial Univer-

sity’s Office of Public Engagement, the St. John’s Women’s Centre (SJWC), Eastern Academy College, and Rewild Wellness. It was due to community collaboration that we were able to offer an outdoor adventure program which provided transportation and childcare at no additional cost to the participants. Community collaboration helped us to reach a diverse group of women, many of whom live at the margins of society, and are frequently an underserved population in outdoor learning programming. This article will explore the benefits and barriers to outdoor learning through community collaboration using Project Hike as an example.

Community collaborations or network structures as Mandell defines “consist of public, private, and not-for-profit organizations and/or individuals in an active, organized collaboration to accomplish some agreed upon purpose or purposes”

(Mandell, 1999, p. 45). By combining resources individuals, organizations, non-profits, and government agencies, are able to deliver programs which resolve a problem or move a shared vision forward (Carmichael & McCole, 2014). Partnering with others is particularly beneficial when challenging financial needs exist, such as decreased budgets, which also lower the human capacity to provide exceptional services.

Additionally, two types of collaborations are common: transactional, meaning more project-based, and transformative, which are long-term and require deep reflection (Sweatman, 2020). Collaborations can be advantageous, since they can add additional support through funding, promotion, policy making, reaching new audiences, and developing infrastructure such as outdoor education centres. Equally, collaborations have disadvantages. For example, organizations may have different objectives which hinder movement forward, collaborations tend to have less hierarchical structures, which is in conflict with traditional management practices, and individuals may experience overwhelming burnout from an already overloaded work schedule (Carmichael & McCole, 2014). For these reasons, when developing a new outdoor program, it is important for all individuals to understand the scope of the project, how they are going to be of service, and what the expectations are for moving forward.

A growing body of research shows how impactful physical activity, social connection, and nature connectedness can be for our health and well-being (Berman et al., 2008; Bosteder & Appleby, 2015; Capaldi et al., 2014; Mitten, 1992; Morris et al., 2019; Pretty et al., 2007). Canada's Health Act sets out the primary objective as:

to protect, promote, and restore the physical and mental well-being of residents of Canada and to facilitate reasonable access to health services without financial or other barriers (Health Canada, 2001).

Yet, compared with men, women disproportionately suffer from mental illnesses such as depres-

sion and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2000). A total of 1,809,200 Canadian women reported having a mood disorder (Statistics Canada, 2021). While the number of women accessing the outdoors has increased in recent years, a high need for women's outdoor programming remains. Research shows that women have been socialized to fear the outdoors, feel as though they do not belong in this traditionally masculine domain, do not have the knowledge to participate in outdoor programs, and they merge their leisure time with that of their families (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Mitten, 1992; Woodward et al., 1989). Community collaboration can be a powerful tool to providing outdoor programming for underserved populations such as women.

To establish the ideal partnerships for program delivery, it is important to understand the population you are hoping to serve. Consider that the many barriers to accessing outdoor learning include: financial constraints, language barriers, geographic location, and ability differences. These barriers are exacerbated when layered with multiple marginalized identities. When working with underserved populations, using an intersectional lens is integral for both program and partner development. Intersectionality is a concept commonly understood as, the interconnected nature of social identities such as class, ability, race, sexuality, and gender and how these identities, when combined, are impacted by power which furthers inequality and disadvantage (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Underserved populations are those such as racially diverse populations, immigrants, refugees, the homeless, LGBTQ2+ persons, low-income, seniors, and those living with a disability. Programs which focus solely on people within a certain category run the risk of homogenizing a group of people and discounting the complexity which comes with multiple identities (Colley et al., 2022). By considering the dynamic nature of humans in program planning, a richer experience can be created keeping people at the center. This chapter specifically discusses the features of Project Hike and generally describes the process of building community and nature connection for women who are in vulnerable situations.

Design

Building connection to self, community, and nature for women who were in vulnerable situations was the focus of the program. Therefore, all features of the program were developed with women in mind, and only women were invited to participate. Fifteen women registered for the program from the St. John's area in Newfoundland and Labrador of Canada. The women ranged in age from 25 to 71 years. We provided childcare through a partnership with Eastern Academy's Child and Youth Care with Addiction Support Worker program. Their students would receive work-term hours for providing childcare for the women in the program. Although this program was not designed for research or data collection, we were able to gather anecdotal evidence. Of the women who participated, there were single moms, seniors, new Canadians, transgender women, hearing impaired, survivors of domestic violence, homeless and low-income women, and those with substance use and mental health disorders. Women were asked to commit to the full 6-week program and, in order to retain their participation, they were able to miss one hike in order to receive a certificate of completion.

The program was designed so that participants would meet at a central location, the SJWC, to drop off children and meet the bus transportation. If needed, they could take a taxi (costs reimbursed) to and from the meeting spot. From there, a bus would transport them to a different trailhead each week. All trails were chosen based on level of difficulty, beginning with an easy level to give confidence to the women and to provide staff with knowledge of their abilities in the group. The difficulty increased each week as the women's confidences and drives to challenge themselves grew. The trails were also within a 40-minute drive from the city limits. An orientation session and six subsequent hikes were offered over a total of 9-weeks, accommodating for two inclement weather days and a pre-scheduled appointment for staff on another day.

The hikes were scheduled on Thursdays from 10:00am to 2:00pm. This length of time provided

the necessary space for the mothers to ensure their children were comfortable with the child minders. The hikes were scheduled on weekday mornings so as to meet the needs of the community partners who would be participating in the program as support staff. As well, the facility for childcare was only available during the week. Each hike was planned for the women to spend two hours on the trail. The intended outcomes were to:

1. enhance social wellbeing by removing barriers to participation,
2. improve physical activity through the hiking program,
3. enhance mental health by developing and strengthening coping skills,
4. improve sense of belonging through communal exploration of nature, and
5. reduce fear associated with wilderness areas.

Conducting a needs assessment is a foundational tool for program development. It is important to consider the needs of the people you are hoping to serve, as well as the needs of the partners you are seeking. Take Me Outside (n.d.) provides a wide variety of assessment tools and resources for this.

Location and Transportation

Transportation is a consideration for rural areas as well as urban areas (Johnson et al., 2001). There are many urban dwellers who do not have access to a vehicle and rely on public transit. In our program five of the women utilized taxi cabs as the more affordable public transit was not as reliable and would take a lot more time to reach a destination, especially with young children. Time is often cited as one of the main constraints to participation in outdoor learning (Henderson & Allen, 1991; Woodward et al., 1989). Navigating public transit schedules and connections can be the difference between 1.5 hours by bus and a 20-minute car ride. For Project Hike, having the women and their children meet at a central location and bussing from there was the most efficient and effective solution. Additionally, we

knew that it would be impossible to pay for taxi cabs to each of the trail locations, and providing carpool brings a host of liability concerns. Women could choose public transit or a taxicab which was paid for by the SJWC. From the SJWC, a bus would take us to the trailhead and bring us back.

Childcare

Another barrier to women participating in outdoor learning is having adequate childcare (Henderson & Allen, 1991). Women are predominantly the primary caregivers and will envelop their leisure into their children's or family's leisure time (Henderson & Allen, 1991). It was important for the women to have the time and space away from their children to recreate and build social connections. Mitten (1994) argues that "being away" is a prerequisite for women to enjoy restorative environments. Locating a community partner for childcare can be quite difficult. Childcare centres are overwhelmed with demand, and having the funds to adequately compensate childcare staff can be limiting. Our efforts to source appropriate childcare saw us reaching out to over 15 different programs and centres. It was through networking and asking others that we found a unique partnership in the Child and Youth Care with Addiction Support Worker program at Eastern Academy. This partnership was a reciprocal one, where the students received practicum hours to build their knowledge and experience, while we received childcare support from excited and energetic students. Reciprocity is important in collaborative partnerships, especially for programs where the service being provided is essential and requires specially trained people to perform the role or if the budget is severely limited.

Funding

One of the largest barriers for individuals, organizations, and non-profits is funding and resource capacity. Partnerships provide relief as they decentralize the funding model allowing for creative solutions. Additionally, funding organizations frequently require partnership for grant application eligibility (O'Farrell & Liu, 2020). Project Hike received a small grant from Memorial

University's Office of Public Engagement Quick-Start program, which provided funds for most of the transportation and trip coordination. As a student at the university, I had access to this funding with the support of a faculty supervisor. This funding allowed for a transactional partnership, where the program would be evaluated and used as evidence to support future programming. The SJWC offered in-kind support by providing an additional staff person for hiking assistance, funds for taxis to and from the SJWC, childcare space, trail snacks for the hikers, and promotion. Childcare was provided by students from Eastern Academy. Additionally, a local micro-brewery donated funds to generally support the program. The transportation company sponsored one of the weekly trips. Finally, a local nursery provided flowers for each hiker at their final hike. There is a saying that "it takes a village to raise a child." In this case, it took a village to bring this program to fruition.

Communication and Promotion

The importance of communication in community collaborations as well as program development and delivery cannot be overstated. Ensuring that all partners understand their contribution and are kept apprised of the status is paramount to successful program delivery. Project Hike had a coordinator to oversee the program and act as the main point of contact. This role was responsible for communicating with the transportation company to ensure proper dates and times were scheduled and to ensure payment. Additionally, this role worked with the contact at Eastern Academy to ensure childcare needs could be met with the appropriate number of childminders, as well as to meet the diverse needs of the children involved.

The coordinator ensured promotional materials were designed and distributed with the appropriate language. For example, the program focused on women in vulnerable situations, but the term "vulnerable" could not be used in this context. Aside from inappropriately pigeonholing people, this word may not have been identified or well received by potential participants.

Instead, alternative language was employed that would resonate with women, such as “social isolation, hardship, and feeling down” as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, most women could connect with these terms without feeling shame or guilt. We first sent Figure 1 to service-based organizations to share with their communities. From there, the SJWC posted Figure 2 on their social media and the group was filled within one day.

A high level of interpersonal skill was necessary to engage with the intake calls, since potential participants could be feeling isolated and lonely. By having a listening ear, they were made to feel comfortable when disclosing their personal issues. When working with vulnerable populations, having empathy and understanding can go a long way, so an experienced or trained professional can be ideal for meeting intake, program delivery, and facilitation with a trauma-informed view.

Figure 1 – Promotional flyer sent to specific service-based organizations.



Figure 2 – Social Media post.



For example, during the hikes, conversations surfaced which could have been triggering for some women. Communicating the expectations for these potential situations with the group in advance was important. Oftentimes, marginalized people have experienced trauma, and it was important for our program to offer a space of acknowledgement and understanding. As well, this group was not a wilderness or adventure therapy group. We made this clear to all participants at our orientation session, acknowledging that we could assist in finding the right supports for them, if needed.

Adaptability

As with most of life, things rarely go as planned. Oftentimes, programs are set with the best intentions, and inevitably something will go amiss. Being adaptable and flexible is crucial to successful program delivery. Project Hike met numerous challenges throughout the program. However, with open communication, quick troubleshooting, and laughter, we were able to make it through. Here are some examples.

The SJWC had offered their downstairs space for childcare throughout the program. Due to unfortunate timing, a flood happened, and within two days we were forced to find an alternative location in proximity for the children and childminders to be accommodated. Luckily, staff from the SJWC connected with a nearby community center and they opened their doors for two weeks.

Additionally, due to unforeseen circumstances, the support person on the hikes from the SJWC could not participate. This meant that we would need to find an alternative support in a brief amount of time and to ensure they were capable of the physical demands of hiking, while also acting in a support capacity. Thankfully, someone from the organization was more than happy to participate in this program.

The bus transportation proved challenging as there was miscommunication between the dispatch and drivers on multiple occasions. While waiting, the group used the opportunities to share stories and laughter. There were many challenges along the way, but through determination, trust, and communication we were able to meet those.

Conclusion

Outdoor learning tends to draw people who are passionate about their work and the people they work with. Collaborating with equally passionate community partners can open opportunities that were previously out of reach. Working with others who share a vision and support one another to bring this vision to fruition can have powerful impacts on the participants as well as the community partners.

While there are challenges to working with others who have limited time or resources, there are also wonderful benefits to community collaborations. The goal of this chapter was to share some of the experiences of developing Project Hike through community partnerships, provide insight into some of the innerworkings, and offer inspiration to providing programs for underserved populations.

The final hike took place in a large urban park where the children and childminders could play while the group hiked their last trail together. I watched with pride as a group member, Meredith, sang out “To the right guys, move to the right!” when people were hiking towards us. On the first hike, Meredith was quiet and a bit nervous about her abilities. To see her leading the group with a smile on her face was beautiful to witness.

We finished by meeting the children and childminders for a finale celebration. Each hiker received a certificate of completion with a flower. One group member had collected sea glass each week and gifted these pieces to everyone, while another made heart shaped key chains with, I love to hike written on them. As I sat back and watched the joy before me, I couldn’t help but agree with Asal, this was magic.

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