

Rich/Collins Final Report

Part 1: Narrative Report

My project began as an extrapolation of a project that I began my freshman year with two of my floormates, working to provide consistent access to technology for the Waltham Community Day Center. The Waltham Community Day Center (CDC) works mostly with individuals who are of low socioeconomic status, experiencing homelessness, and struggling with addiction. The CDC currently has three permanent PC desktops, though a large number of daily participants who are looking to use technology for their own personal reasons.

I began my project by coordinating with Carolyn Montalto, the Executive Director of the CDC, on what sort of project we were looking for this year. We decided to pursue a sustainable means of partnering with Brandeis' Waltham Group, specifically the Hunger and Homelessness branch, on creating a consistent volunteer opportunity for Brandeis students. In this program, Waltham Group would send 3-4 Brandeis volunteers to work with 10-12 participants at the CDC, specifically by bringing laptops that participants can work on individually for a few hours a day on their own personal projects. The volunteers would work by providing assistance on creating emails, resumes, finding housing, and other personalized needs that the participants decided to work towards on a given presentation date.

After speaking with Carolyn, I applied for the Rich/Collins Fellowship to obtain resources to purchase laptops and incentives programs for the participants at the CDC, as well as reached out to the Waltham Group to set up the infrastructure for a long run program. After working with the Waltham Group to set up a consistent volunteer program through outreach of their programs, I purchased 10 laptops for participants to use and 24 \$10 CVS gift cards as an

incentive for participants to be involved in the workshop. These gift cards proved important not only in encouraging participants to sign up, but provided the ability for participants to obtain ease of access for medicine, flu shots, food, and other essential services available at CVS.

This project proved important for participants on two levels. First, it allowed them a personal means of changing their own lives, and secondly it allowed them consistent access to these services. Due to the limited resources of the CDC, consistent internet access is nearly impossible to come by, meaning that participants are nearly completely prevented from beginning long term projects such as license/id applications, staying up to date on results from job and housing searches, and staying connected to family members. By providing a more consistent means of achieving the Internet however, this project allowed multiple participants to express hope at the prospect of beginning and completing a long-term project for themselves, rather than spending most of their day unsure about their next steps in life.

One of the larger challenges I realized upon creation of this project however came in the form of finding consistently prepared volunteers. While there is a plethora of Brandeis students with a passion for social justice, the body proves relatively limited in their ability to produce students who are both interested and capable of working with a population such as at the CDC and with enough knowledge of computers to feel confident explaining things reasonably and efficiently.

One of the other large challenges I realized however came in the form of implementing consistent workshops throughout the course of a semester. While we had planned for 3 workshops, the CDC had needed to cancel twice due to personal emergencies. These hindrances, while obviously not ideal, served as a good reminder that consistency in working with institutions such as the CDC are difficult to create during initial stages and need to be accounted

for in planning, most effectively through planning for more workshops throughout the semester and creating a more flexible program outline.

Currently, the project is on hold for the summer but will begin again at the start of Brandeis' fall semester. Waltham Group has created a solid infrastructure for volunteer recruitment of the Brandeis population, and has even considered preliminary discussion of training programs for volunteers to get them more comfortable working with participants at the CDC. Similarly, the CDC is working to create more available room in their schedule and increase outreach to participants, through more consistent flyers, and creating a culture that expects the workshop to attend more frequently.

The CDC is also currently beginning discussions to expand their operation, both in terms of the project and independently from it. The CDC will most likely expand their building by acquiring another building over the summer, providing a walkway between the two and creating a permanent, large space for computers and internet access. With the expansion of the CDC in this way, my project and Waltham Group hopes to be involved with assisting their expansion and providing more volunteers to work with participants to use technology for long run projects, leading to a place where more participants feel comfortable working on long run projects without holistic, real time assistance from Brandeis students.

Part 2: Evaluation

One of the most important realizations in the expansion of the project proved the overwhelming feedback we received from participants about how consistent work was essential to making real progress. As the CDC leaves little room for consistent internet access in their current setup, every one of the participants in the workshop emphasized the importance of

consistency, highlighted best perhaps when one participant outwardly emphasized that “It’s hard to make consistent progress without a computer every day.” This sort of information proved crucial in evaluating the project, as the initial outline planned for workshops to only occur once a month, though feedback from participants was so positive that I re-evaluated with the CDC and determined that workshops every other week would find a better balance between what participants were asking for and what was possible for Brandeis students. Similarly, given that I was forced to hold workshops with Brandeis library computers last year, the ability to save information for specific users on personal computers has proved essential in creating a long run programs for participants at the CDC.

Another outcome that was particularly clear after the workshop was the amount of support that Waltham Group was able to provide and streamline the process. Besides providing consistent access to volunteers and passionate students who wished to help with future workshops, Waltham Group allowed for a streamlined access to transportation, consistent emotional support for myself and other volunteers, and keeping up with the timeline for workshops.

While it proved difficult to offer a reliable survey to the participants from the CDC, I believe the types of enterprises that they pursued is more indicative to the impact that the workshop had on them. Participants engaged in a wide range of activities, from job searches to housing applications to driver’s license renewal to citizenship applications to resume writing. These pursuits proved particularly notable due to the amount of passion that participants put into them, working diligently to make as much progress as possible in the limited time of the workshop. Participants similarly asked our cohort to increase both the frequency of the projects

consistently and to increase the amount of laptops provided so that more individuals could participate in an individual workshop, highlighting the enthusiasm for continued efforts.

One of the most notable elements of these enterprises however is the extraordinary diversity that participants displayed. While each participant pursued a serious activity for themselves, rarely was there similarity in overlap between these projects. I think that this particularly speaks to how although a community may seem homogenous in their needs, a more detailed analysis of their needs tends to show otherwise, and that tailored assistance proves essential in social justice. However, one of the common themes that participants displayed was that they tended towards job and housing listings that included phone numbers, as communication through email and private services proves difficult given limited internet access.

Another key outcome of the program in particular proved the more focused nature of this year's group in comparison to previous iterations of the workshop. While last year's model led to groups that were mostly focused but consistently included 3 or 4 individuals more focused on entertainment such as movies and television, each participant in the workshop during this program was independently focused on an important task. Whether this was due to the inclusion of flyers, institutional support of Waltham Group, or another independent reason, this realization proves important for future pursuits of the project, as we can attempt to isolate variables that prove more impactful in drawing a more engaged audience.

Part 3: Personal Reflection

One of the most obvious takeaways for me during the project was the re-evaluation I took towards assisting communities experiencing homeless and struggling with addiction. While many participants are benefited by the same broad concept, the more detailed version of

assistance that is required is usually far more tailored. While each participant benefited from access to the internet, each individual proved unique in their necessities beyond that, whether it be assistance in making a resume or finding housing or something different entirely. This was formative for me as it showed that social justice work exists best at the level in which it is most tailored to individual assistance, rather than attempting to push blanket reforms onto populations.

Another key takeaway for me personally was the willingness that some participants had to take action for themselves. While institutions such as the CDC often times exist as a place to ground oneself while in a tough position and take time to collect themselves, there are those who strive to take improvements in their lives and are unfortunately constrained by the limited resources available to them. By providing consistent access to those resources, such as internet access, individuals can allow participants to shape their own lives, rather than allowing them to live in consistency or providing less efficient assistance.

Another thing I learned throughout the project is that organizations such as the CDC and their participants require a specific type of flexibility that is not always easy to obtain from a body of volunteers like Brandeis students. In terms of when workshops could be held, who would be able to volunteer in them, and how often they ought to be held, there were constant discussions on how to tailor the needs of participants at the CDC with the rigid schedules of Brandeis students. This goes to show not only the differences between the two types of populations, but also the flexibility needed as an organizer in creating a sustainable program for both bodies to work within.

One of the final things that I learned throughout the course of my project was that although putting together a sustainable project at Brandeis proves difficult, there are significant resources and support networks that exist to make it worthwhile. Through the countless hours,

massive effort in organizing resources and recruiting volunteers, and the payoff of going through with the workshop, having confidence in a sustainable program at Brandeis is incredibly rewarding as you feel like you have not only changed the way that Brandeis operates as a social justice institution, but have the potential to change countless lives throughout the future.