Chisholm Center Needs Assessment

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Sociology 363JS: Community Based Research

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Abstract
The Chisholm Center has been providing the local DeLand community a location to congregate and socialize since 1982. At the request of the City of DeLand and DeLand’s Parks and Recreation Department, a needs-assessment of the facility has been conducted through Stetson’s Community-Based Research class taught by Dr. John Schorr. Surveys were distributed to both the Zippy Swingers, the Chisholm Center’s senior program, and to the parents of children who attend the Center’s after-care program. Children were interviewed in person and asked a variety of questions about their experiences at the Chisholm Center. Results show a high approval rating of the tutoring program from both the parents and the children. Further surveying of local elementary school parents indicated that transportation availability may influence their decision on sending their child to the Chisholm Center after school. Results from the Zippy Swingers indicate high satisfaction with the program, but many agreed with suggestions of increasing the number of meetings each week (currently at one) as well as increasing the number of participants via advertising in the community.

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- Dr. John K. Schorr, Professor of Sociology, Stetson University
Introduction

The Chisholm Community Center, established in DeLand in 1982, was named after Joe Chisholm, a local pioneer in minority youth programming, currently serves the Spring Hill community in a number of ways. The Center provides after-school tutoring and activities for local elementary school students, evening open-gym hours for middle and high school students, vocational training for at-risk students, and a program designed and implemented by local senior ladies. The center has numerous facilities including a pool, a playground, a soccer field, indoor and outdoor basketball courts, a weight room, a game room, and an auditorium. Under the instruction of Dr. John K. Schorr, and with the permission of both Michael Pleus and Rick Hall, Diane Elderkin and I conducted a needs-assessment of the facility in order to provide an accurate perspective of the facilities current operations. Using multiple groups of surveys, as well as multiple groups of interviews, we were able to piece together a picture of the facilities current operating level, as well as its full potential.

Research Design

Our research was conducted in two primary groups: surveys and interviews. Surveys were distributed to three populations: the parents of children who attend the Chisholm Center’s after-school program, parents of children at two local elementary schools, and the Zippy Swingers (the aforementioned senior ladies group). The parents of children who attend the after-school program received a 19 question survey, which asked such questions as “How does your child get to the Chisholm Center?”, “Who tutors your child at the Chisholm Center?”, and “Do you feel that there is strong communication
between you as the parent, and the Chisholm Center Staff?” Answers were provided via
Likert scales, multiple choice responses, and short-answer (write-in) responses. These
surveys also contained consent forms, to allow us to interview the children, which will be
discussed shortly.

The second population of surveying consisted of the parents of children attending
Edith Stark and George Marks Elementary Schools. These surveys were conducted
orally, administered to the first 30 parents in the parent pick-up loop of each respective
school. The survey was three-questions, and all answers were in the yes/no format. The
first question asked, “Do you know of the Chisholm Center?” A no response to the first
question eliminated the need to ask the remaining two questions: “Do you, or have you
ever had, a child attending the Chisholm Center?” and “If transportation were provided,
would you consider sending your child to the Chisholm Center for their after-school
program?”

The Zippy Swingers were the target population of the third series of surveying.
The Zippy Swingers are a group of female seniors who plan activities for each month.
They meet once a week, and are in charge of their program (they decide on activities,
trips, etc. independently). They received a 7 question survey which asked such questions
as, “Would you like to see increased membership of the Zippy Swingers program?”,”If
the program were offered two times a week, how often would you attend?” and “Do you
feel that your suggestions for future events are considered in each month’s planning?”
Responses from this survey came in the Likert, multiple-choice, and short-response
formats.
In addition to the surveys, three target populations were interviewed. The first, and primary population, were the elementary school students who attend the Center’s after-school program. Their interviews consisted of open-ended questions with some probe questions for greater insight. They were asked such questions as “Do the tutors help you with your homework?”, “Do you enjoy your time at the Chisholm Center”, and “What would you like to see added or improved at the Center?” Their responses, although somewhat minimal, were extremely helpful in our study.

The staff of the Chisholm Center was also interviewed. Their interviews were more open-ended than the children’s; they were to recall the positive and negative aspects of the Center, as well as any additional information they wanted to tell us.

Stetson undergraduate students, who volunteer to tutor the children at the Chisholm Center, were interviewed as well. Much as the staff interviews were conducted, the volunteer interviews were fairly open-ended, with the same basic question as the staff interview.

Findings

Upon completion of all interviews and surveys, data was compiled and analyzed. The results were as follows:

Surveys

Nine parents of after-school program students returned surveys, out of approximately 25 distributed. Of those returned, all nine parents answered identically on multiple questions. When asked if they would allow their child to ride a bus to the Chisholm Center if it was provided, all nine said yes. They all described the Chisholm
Center as safe, yet at the same time a majority of them felt that security cameras needed to be added to the Center. All nine also agreed tutoring program is effective, although none of them were aware that Stetson undergraduate students provide help in the afternoons (all agreed that the Chisholm Center staff were the only people who tutored their children). All nine also felt that the communication between staff and parents was strong. There was a disappointingly low response rate on the short-answer questions, but it seemed apparent that the parents felt that sports were their child’s favorite activity at the Center.

Sixty responses were received in total from the two local elementary schools. At Edith Stark, located approximately 3 blocks from the Chisholm Center, only 50% of the parents were aware of the Chisholm Center (fifteen out of thirty Responses). Of those 50% who were aware of Center, three (out of fifteen) had children attending. Nine parents said that they would consider sending their child to the Center after school on a bus, if provided, as opposed to five who would not.

George Marks, located approximately 2.5 miles from the Chisholm Center, had a higher rate of knowledge of the Center. Seventeen out of thirty parents were aware of the Center, but of those seventeen none had children attending. Thirteen of those seventeen would consider sending their child on a bus if provided.

Eleven Zippy Swingers returned their respective survey, the entire present group during one of their weekly meetings when the survey was distributed. All indicated that they were very happy with the current program, but all also responded that they would like to see increased membership. Seven members felt that advertising would help increase their membership, while four felt that advertising would somewhat help increase
their membership. Six Swingers were willing to help advertise, however, none were willing to lead the advertising efforts. Again, six members responded that they would attend two meetings a week, if offered, while three would only attend once, and two were not sure. Five members felt their suggestions for each month’s activities were considered all of the time, four felt that their suggestions were considered sometimes, and two responded with “not applicable”.

Interviews

Due to consent issues, only seven children attending the after-school program were interviewed. Surprisingly, they all had somewhat of the same answers for all of our questions. Unsurprisingly, these answers were not very detailed or in-depth (as the students were young, and many of them appeared as though they had never considered these questions before). All of the children wanted to see a modernized game room and, more specifically, wanted access to a Nintendo Wii console. They all mentioned friends in local schools, who they would like to see attend the Center with them. Perhaps one of the most important of the findings from these interviews was that the children all feel that the current tutoring program is effective; it helps them complete their homework and, in some cases, causes visible grade improvements in the classroom. All of the children enjoyed playing sports, a topic that will be discussed again below.

Three members of the Chisholm Center staff were interviewed. All felt that the day-to-day operations of the facility ran well. They all pointed out the same issues, however, that need to be addressed. The first concerned alternative programming. The staff would like to see such programs as Spring Break camp, however, it seems as those
the membership of the Center would need to increase before such plans are possible. They would also like to see outdoor renovations, all of which have been addressed at some point in this paper (with the exception of one suggestion: a jogging track around the Center to cater to the runners and joggers of the area who are currently forced to Earl Brown Park if they want to use tracks). In addition to outdoor facilities, they would like to see the game room renovation, which is in the works under currently-held grant money.

The three Stetson volunteers who were interviewed offered a somewhat different perspective on the operations of the Center. It is they who implied the status-quo issue (discussed below) and it is they who seem to be the most proactive members of the Center. One of the biggest qualms they had was the fiscal situation of the Center; they have repeatedly provided items such as footballs for the kids to use, at their own expense, because the Center was not providing them. One tutor mentioned how it was discovered that these elementary school students would do just about anything for a simple reward like a mechanical pencil. A reward which doesn’t cost much, but which the Center should be providing, not the students. It is arguable that they did not have to do this, but since it seems to create an effective and manageable environment (along the lines of, first one to finish his/her homework today receives a mechanical pencil, creating incentive to complete work) it should now be assimilated by the Center. The snacks that students receive upon arriving to the center are provided via philanthropic funding from the Stetson University chapter of the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity. This type of funding, while honorable, should be provided by the Center, to ensure its continuance through the future. Understandably, money is an issue in these times, but these problems must still be
Conclusions and Recommendations

Before addressing the conclusions and recommendations, I would like to take a moment to point out some observations made by Diane and I, that were not addressed by our surveys or interviews. To start, the facilities at the Chisholm Center are, across the board, outdated. The Center has recently received grants to update some facilities, but the work from these grants has yet to start. The grants cover a new-and-improved game-room, a newly built weight room, and work on the gym ceiling, which is deteriorating and leaky. Grants are not, however, in any way covering one of the biggest problems the Center has, that of the pool. The pool at the Center has the potential of being a main selling point; even though it is ¼ of an inch away from being Olympic sized (which, understandably, would be more apt to bringing events such as swim meets in), it is still a nice pool with two water slides. It is not, however, utilized in any way. Inquiries about the pool resulted in vague and different answers; I am still not certain if there are mechanical issues, or simply maintenance issues. Either way, during the heat of the typical Florida summer, a public pool becomes a communities focal point. If the Center utilized the pool, it would begin to more accurately represent a community center as, undoubtedly, it would bring more members of the community onto the property.

Another point of consideration: some of the responses from the parents of children attending the after-school program seemed to be somewhat conflicting. Stating that the Center is secure, but that it also needs cameras is somewhat contradictory. The
parents lack of knowledge of who is dealing with their children demonstrates somewhat visibly the lack of participation they have with their children. The staff and tutors at the Center seemed to agree that the parents aren’t as involved as they could be, as the lack of responses to our survey reflects. Since the Chisholm Center is a community center, I would recommend investigating the possibility of implementing some sort of family-centered program, perhaps on the weekends, that’s sole purpose was to improve relations and involvement between the children and their parents, which potentially could serve to better the community as a whole.

From our findings, I would propose a two-tier review system in order to update the Center as a whole. The first tier would have to focus on the current staff. While the staff is mostly effective in helping and monitoring the children, there is some evidence that they might have fallen into certain patterns that have now become the status-quo. The staff with whom Diane and I interacted with at the Center have all been there for quite some time, so this fact is not surprising. Unfortunately, maintaining the status-quo does not make for a distinguishable business (or community center) and thus, if improvements to the Center are to be made, they must begin with the core. The staff should be more pro-active in planning such programs as rewards systems (currently devised by one of the Stetson students) and should also be sure to use appropriate discipline when necessary (that is, only raising voices when necessary, and disciplining behaviors such as cursing, which they might not even be aware is occurring). Obviously if the Center is looking to expand its membership base, more staff will probably be necessary and, if so, the focus in hiring should be proactive character traits in order to
surpass the status quo issue. If this issue is addressed first, then the Center will be prepared for the second tier of review.

The second tier focuses more on membership and what specifically attracts membership. All children interviewed informed us that they had friends at multiple schools that they would like to see at the Center. This is a great starting point for advertising; while some schools do not permit flyers or posters, getting the word out to these friends in other schools, and then potentially having them spread the word could create a potential-member network. And a way to attract these children (and their parents) to the Center would be the availability of transportation. A school-bus, or even 15-passenger van, has the potential to increase membership exponentially. All results of our surveys indicate that transportation would play a vital role in a parent’s decision to send their child to the Center. Facility improvements could be highlighted as a selling as point as well; I am not sure as to the timeline of the pending grants, but the sooner the improvements to the game room, gym, and weight room are made, the better. And of course, the pool renovations need to be addressed as soon as possible. The pool represents a lot of wasted potential; the inclusion of a working pool and its advertisement in the local community should attract attention to the Center, especially during the summer and fall seasons. Most children and parents agreed that sports is a primary interest at the Center. The unavailability of the soccer field, due to its security problems, forces children to play sports on a small Astroturf plot, which is shared with the playground. It is unfortunate that these kids cannot enjoy the use of the field to play their games, which would provide them with much more space and options. I do not have any recommendations on how to fix this problem specifically, but it is one that should be
addressed. Perhaps increased security near the center (more police patrolling the neighborhood, or the installation of visible security cameras) would help alleviate this problem.

The tutoring program is unanimously effective. Parents, tutors, staff, and children all agreed that it helps. Thus, it too should be a focal point of advertising. And since it seems to be effective, there does not appear to be any reason to change its functioning or operations.

Advertising might help increase the membership of the Center. With only 50% of surveyed parents at a school three blocks away being aware of the Center, there clearly needs to be a push for “name recognition”. Signs in roadways, posters around community focal points, and perhaps even local cable advertising might help increase awareness of the Center and its programs and thus might increase membership.

If membership begins to increase, the opportunity for the alternative programming might be more feasible. Scheduling a Spring Break camp for students would be effective only if it is known that a decent number of children will attend. Thus, the increase in membership brings more potential for successful programs and

Overall, the Chisholm Community Center offers a lot of potential for the Spring Hill neighborhood. Its underutilization, however, holds it back from being a community focal point. Through a series of steps however, outlined above, I feel that the Chisholm Center could improve its overall functioning very effectively. By focusing first on staff, then on membership, facilities, transportation, and advertising, all of these problems can be addressed and fixed creating, essentially, and updated version of the Chisholm Center
that will be more attractive to the community around it.