

X Marks the Meal: Assessment of Free and Low-Cost Meals in the Vancouver Food Asset Map

Group 12

LFS 350

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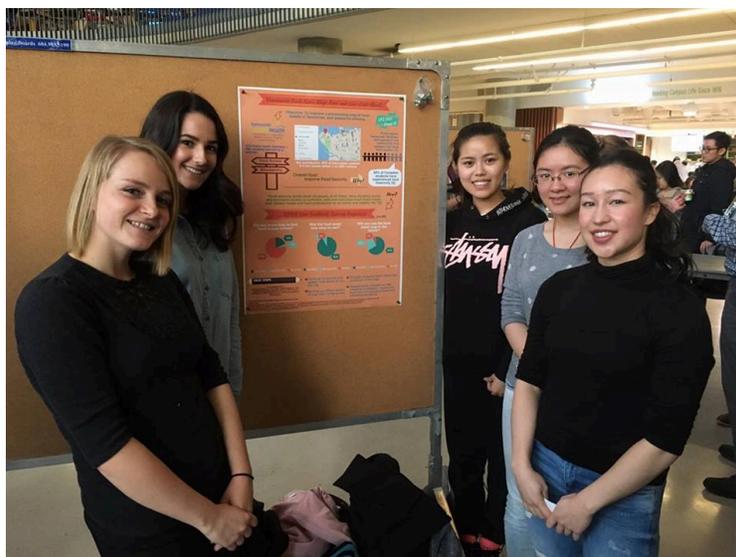


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Introduction

The Greater Vancouver population hosts many individuals and families who are vulnerable to food insecurity. Food insecurity exists when an individual lacks secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food due to a lack of money (Roshanafshar & Hawkins, 2015). Individuals who are vulnerable to food insecurity include single parents, low income individuals and families, elderly, and individuals of Aboriginal descent (Hughes et al., 2011). The focus of this project is to increase food security through access, which ensures that available food resources are indeed accessible. In Vancouver, plenty of nutritious assets for nourishment exist, however difficulties including remoteness, language barriers, low income, disability, and general lack of knowledge prevent vulnerable populations from accessing such resources. To help mitigate this issue, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) Public Health Dietitians have created a food asset map inspired by the Toronto Food by Ward initiative. Through collaboration with VCH dietitians and partners within the community, this project aims to contribute to the existing food asset map by adding and updating information on food assets in the City of Vancouver. Using an asset-based community development (ABCD) framework, this project highlights the strengths of the local community food system, while identifying areas for improvement. Our focus for this project was to gather and evaluate information on free or low-cost meals in the community to update the Vancouver Food Asset Map (VFAM) through three major objectives:

1. Update the existing VFAM with the location, permission, and program details of free or low-cost meals programs across the City of Vancouver.

2. Evaluate the performance of the VFAM in regards to ease of navigation and usability through a qualitative survey conducted at UBC.
3. Determine opportunities for the continued improvement and expansion of the VFAM.

Food assets are physical facilities or social services in the community, such as farmers markets, community kitchens, or neighborhood food networks, which help to facilitate connections between individuals and their local food system (Vancouver Food Policy Council, 2013). Mapping food assets on a user-friendly online resource helps to raising awareness of their distribution, while potentially increasing their accessibility. This method of identifying existing local resources, and creating a means to connect them exemplifies the principle of ABCD, which aims to help to build capacity among community members and create inclusive, participatory communities (Valley, 2016). VCH employs this method by facilitating connections with, and utilizing the expertise of the neighborhood food networks within the City of Vancouver to receive and also help distribute valuable information on food assets.

Through the process of mapping assets, we can also identify relevant cultural, ecological, and economic assets that also contribute to public health and well-being (Rosenblatt, S., n.d.). Furthermore, the mapping process enables agencies and community partners to utilize food assets strategically and direct this information towards the planning of future initiatives, contributing to long-term food systems change. In order to achieve our objectives in the development of the VFAM, we aimed to answer the following three research questions:

1. Does the VFAM tool help individuals identify the location of food assets in Vancouver?
2. How effective do users find this tool for locating suitable and accessible food assets?
3. How could the VFAM be improved?

Methods

An excel spreadsheet of 78 existing food assets was supplied by our partners at VCH. In order to update the food assets provided, assets were divided up equally amongst the 6 group members to contact individually. Contact was made by email, phone, as well as gathered from public online information.

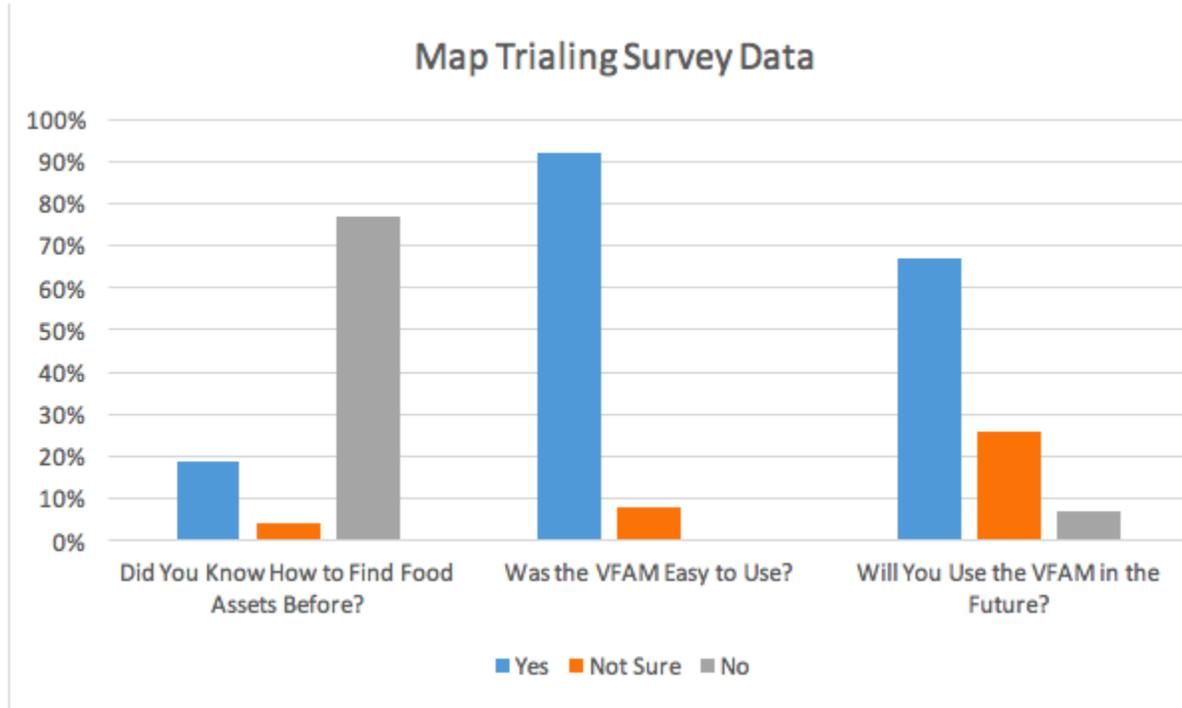
Qualitative data collection using surveys provided by our VCH partners were used to collect feedback from students on the UBC Vancouver campus. Surveys were conducted between 1 and 3 pm on November 16, 2016. The group split into 3 pairs, and visited 3 different locations on campus to survey students: the AMS Food Bank/Student Union Building, Agora Cafe, and Sprouts Cafe. Survey questions provided categorical answers to 6 questions, yes/no/unsure, in addition to written comments. Categorical data was analyzed by coding yes/no/unsure numerically as 1/2/3, which allowed the creation of a frequency table. The various comments left by students in the written sections were used to develop recommendations for the improvement of the VFAM.

Ethical considerations were taken into account by having each survey participant complete an informed consent form before their responses could be collected. This ensured that all participants understood the purpose of the study, how their information would be used, and if consent was given to have their name and contact information listed. Unless otherwise specified, all survey results were anonymous. Each participant was briefed by a group member on the instructions of how to use the map prior to use, then they were given an electronic device with the map app open, and the survey form to fill out at their leisure.

Results

In regards to the first objective of this project, 96% of the free or low-cost meal assets on the VFAM were updated. In addition, eight new assets were added, three of which are located on the UBC campus. For the second objective of the CBEL project, the surveys provided structured feedback that was compiled to give meaningful statistics for our VCH community partners. A summary of these responses are included in the graphs below. Overall, survey responses indicated that the majority of students (77%) had not been previously aware of pre-existing food assets, 92% found the map easy to use, and about two-thirds (67%) of students would use it again in the future.

Table 1. Survey Results



Discussion

Based on the results of the map trialing, students confirmed that the VFAM is an easy tool to navigate, and indicated that they would use it again in the future. Through our interactions, we also observed that many did not previously know how to locate food assets in their surroundings. These interactions helped to design recommendations for improving the VFAM in the future. In addressing our research inquiries, it was indicated that the VFAM has the potential to help individuals locate food assets in Vancouver. Users' reported the tool as easy to navigate, and enjoyed the ability to narrow down search options to assets of interest. Research results also raised ideas regarding the improvement and expansion of the VFAM in the future, which we hope will be passed onto future LFS 350 groups to continue.

According to a 2008 survey, up to 8% of Vancouver households experience some form of food insecurity (Roshanafshar & Hawkins, 2015). Among the individuals identified as vulnerable to food security, the post-secondary student population is an underemphasized low-income group that the VFAM helped to identify. There is a noticeably unequal distribution of food assets in the neighborhood surrounding UBC and on campus (Google Maps, 2016). As reported in the study by Meal Exchange (2016), 39% of students in universities across Canada have experienced food insecurity at some point.

Through our focus on free or low-cost meals for this project, we were able to identify the disparity in such assets on campus, and assess the demand and interest in expanding these resources based on the population surveyed. Overall, using the method of community-based experiential learning to update the VFAM, and trialing its efficacy, we found that this is a relevant tool in helping to increase access to food assets for students.

As these surveys were conducted at UBC, these results are not representative of the findings from other communities who trialed the VFAM in Metro Vancouver. Student respondents are likely more proficient in using electronic devices to navigate assets, and there was little communication barriers in relaying information about the project and its purpose. Another limitation discovered through the map trialing process was the confusion around the term “food asset”. Since this is an unfamiliar term to most individuals, this could have influenced the responses in the survey data depending on

how the term was interpreted. It is also possible that the favorable results presented from the map trialing are over-represented.

Conclusion

As a result of this research, it is evident that there is limited information about food assets available in the community and on campus. The VFAM is a unique tool which employs an asset-based approach to coordinate food-related initiatives across the city. Questions remain regarding the efficacy and practicality of the VFAM among the general public, and the extent to which its existence will help alleviate difficulties in accessing food for Vancouver residents. The VFAM helps individuals to identify food assets in their surroundings, however it cannot address challenges of mobility, transportation, and unequal distribution. The VFAM should continue to identify and add assets in Vancouver. Recommendations from the individuals surveyed included developing an offline version of the map, and enabling a rating and comment system so that users of the map can contribute their knowledge to others. In conclusion, our VCH partners have developed a tool which has great potential to aid individuals and agencies in the community to help build capacity in accessing food resources, and we look forward to seeing its expansion in the future.

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Appendix

CBEL Reflections

Student 1:

Completing this CBEL project was a very rewarding experience. At times it was overwhelming to try to update the spreadsheet to make it as accurate as possible, but the group overcame this and I was very satisfied with the results. A highlight of this project was during a flexible learning session when I interacted with community members to trial the map. Seeing genuine reactions of surprise and interest made doing this work worthwhile. Checking in with the group at our weekly tutorials served as great opportunities to ensure everyone was on the same page, keeping us on track with updating the map and planning how we would trial it. This team has been very supportive of each other and everyone has been reliable, getting their respective sections done on time. This made the project run smoothly. Through my contribution to this VFAM tool I am hopeful I can make an impact on the lives of individuals by improving their access to food.

Student 2:

During this semester, through working with community partners, I learned how to collaborate with group members and communicated effectively with community partners as well as how to plan, implement, and evaluate actions to address all food systems challenges that we faced. It was hard to begin since we were not familiar with others working style but everything went well as soon as we recognized what we were doing,

why we needed to do it and how our work actually benefit our living community.

Ultimately, we all achieved a successful outcome and reached our expectations. Like we mentioned in Blog 3 and 4, each of our group members experienced moments of significance change which reflect on our contribution of Vancouver Food Asset Map.

Through contacting all food assets on the map, we aimed to provide a tool to all community members and agencies for locating community food assets that are easy to follow, accurate. Therefore, in a long term, I hope food insecurity problems can be improved based on our free and low cost meal programs. At that time, I believe all individuals can have access to affordable, safe, culturally appropriate, ecologically responsible and nutritionally adequate food at all times.

Student 3:

In week 4 we touched on the true sentiment toward the method of student learning in LFS 350 with Tim Harford's TedTalk: "How Messy Problems Inspire Creativity". The implicit, and sometimes vague learning that is sewn into the course structure brings frustration and confusion to students when completing assignments and reflecting throughout the term. The group work is notorious for conflict, inequality, and procrastination. Yet, as much as we hate to admit it, there is a lot to gain from being forced to compromise with others, analyze situations more critically, and take initiative in the work with our community partners. And much like Tim Harford's message that difficult, uncomfortable, and messy situations often lead to more success, the participatory learning experience provided by the CBEL project fostered more responsibility and meaning to the work that was carried out over the term. The collaboration with a community partner held us accountable and more cognizant of our

X Marks the Meal: Assessment of Free and Low-cost Meals in the Vancouver Food Asset Map actions, and phrases used in our assignments. Furthermore, I feel pride and accomplishment in the results of this project, and seeing that our work is contributing to something larger than a grade. I am thankful to have had the opportunity to work with kind, supportive and motivated partners in the community and to have contributed to something with a greater, and very relevant, purpose such as community food access.

Student 4:

It was a valuable experience to be part of our CBEL project. By doing this project, I changed my opinion about how much input is required to do a community project, I am surprised to realize how much effort, people and time that is needed for operating one project. All the e-lectures are influencing, I have learned to see a problem from personal perspective to city-wide base overview. When we were updating the spreadsheet, I have forced myself to step out of my comfort zone and communicated officially with my assigned community partners on the phone; this is something I would never done before. I am glad to work with all these supportive and talented group members and community partners, all of us had chance to show our specialty, we have collaborated well and our hard work really paid off. Even though the food asset map is not published yet, but I'm already felt excited to be part of something that would have impact on our community. Before this opportunity, I was just one of an ordinary student who don't have any experience or connection in the society except for studying in school, but somehow now I felt I have connection to the community.

Student 5:

Over the duration of the project, I felt that implementing the flexible learning sessions was an effective way to give us more time to focus on working on our objectives and completing tasks at hand. The group work was balanced and not particularly stressful, given that all members were interested in helping to improve the local community. The CBEL project showed that while making positive changes is not as intimidating as it may seem, it requires different perspectives to identify the scope of a problem at hand, and defining the objectives is no easy task. In terms of using online platforms to complete assignments, it is much easier to complete online tasks as a group rather than meeting in person, as not nearly everything can be completed within the tutorials.

In areas presenting challenges, I would argue that the material presented in this course related to the CBEL project, while making use of concepts important to the fundamental ideas of systems thinking and harmonization of scholarly and community-based beliefs, was too heavily invested in the social sciences and psychological ethics for my style of thinking, which is more built on a foundation of pragmatism and differentiating hard facts from opinions. There is where group discussion came in and different mindsets collaborated to achieve the common goal.