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LADIES WHO LUNCH RESEARCH WORKSHOPS: FINAL REPORT

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Erin Pratley, PhD* and Anne Bergen, PhD*

*Research Associate, Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship

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**INSTITUTE for
COMMUNITY ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP**

College of Social and Applied Human Sciences
University of Guelph Guelph, Ontario Canada N1G 2W1
phone: 519 / 824.4120 Ext. 53829 | email: ices@uoguelph.ca
www.theresearchshop.ca



SUMMARY

Three evaluation research workshops were conducted by researchers at the Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship (ICES) in order to understand the experiences of women in the Ladies Who Lunch (LWL) program and barriers to scaling out the program to reach more women. The main benefits of this program include greater social connections both in the program and in the community, as well as increased food literacy and positive changes in diet. The women identified barriers to broadening the program, including: the ideal size of the program; the association of the program with the hosting church; the roles of both the organizers and the participants; and an uncertain funding environment.



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INTRODUCTION

The Ladies Who Lunch program is a weekly lunch program that is run by the Centre Wellington Social Justice Group, on behalf of the Centre Wellington Food Bank. All women in Centre Wellington are welcome to attend, with a focus on inviting women who are low-income or socially isolated. The Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship (ICES) at the University of Guelph conducted participatory evaluation research to understand whether the experience of communal dining in the program contributes to increased social connections and promotes health for participants. In this work, health is considered broadly, and includes social, mental and physical wellbeing, following the widely accepted definition set by the World Health Organization (WHO 1948). A second goal is to understand the potential enablers and barriers to sustaining or expanding this program.

METHODS AND RESEARCH GOALS

This research used a participatory approach to program evaluation. In an initial workshop, ICES researcher Dr. Erin Pratley consulted with Ladies Who Lunch participants to collectively decide on the most appropriate methods for conducting evaluation research and the outcomes they were most interested in tracking (see workshop outline in Appendix A). A survey had been planned in the funding proposal made to Women's XChange (Women's College Hospital) and based on the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale and self-reported health questions in the Canadian Community Health Survey. However, the participants in the first workshop agreed that a workshop format better reflected the tone of the program, with participants noting the workshop format is "interactive"; allows participants to "share stories"; and, promotes a sense of "community". Three workshops were decided on, and the participants noted the importance of inviting both participants in the program ('lunchers') and the volunteer organizers ('organizers') to take part in the workshops. The women were most interested in hearing stories about the varied impacts of the program on individuals and to provide their feedback about the LWL program.

The consultation took place during the first workshop in June 2014; the second workshop was conducted in September 2014 and the final workshop took place in December 2014. In each hour-long workshop, the ICES researcher used key questions to initiate and facilitate the discussion. A graduate student research assistant was present to take notes during each workshop.



WORKSHOP FINDINGS

There were 18 participants in the first workshop, 13 in the second workshop and 18 at the final workshop. Both lunchers and organizers participated in all three workshops. At each workshop there was at least one individual who was at the program for the first time, but most were women who attend the program regularly. In the last workshop there were a few women with young children, a demographic that the lunchers had expressed an interest in reaching out to at the first and second workshop. Childcare and lunch was provided for children.

Thematic analysis of workshop responses and notes yielded four main themes. The first two themes involve the benefits of the program for the women, the third theme relates to aspects of the program that act as barriers to reaching more women, and the fourth theme relates to issues with how the program is delivered.

1. SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND BELONGING

The program led to an increased sense of belonging to a social group for some participants. One woman stated that she felt as if she “actually belonged” when she walked in the door each week and was greeted by others. Another woman noted that she marked Wednesday (the program day) on her calendar and looked forward to the structure the program provided to her week.

The social connections were stronger at the second workshop, and a luncher noted in the workshop that the group “bonded more over the summer.” One woman said she was surprised that she actually referred to the other women as friends, as she did not use the term ‘friend’ with many people.

At the final workshop, one woman opened up to share that the weekly lunch acted for her as refuge from small-town gossip. She has had some family issues and often feels judged in other places, but has not felt judged by others attending these lunches. Following her story, another woman stated that it is a space where it is okay to cry, to open up, and to share issues. As one woman summarized at the final workshop, the LWL lead her to feel that her “soul has been fed as well as my stomach.”

Increased social connections were also evident outside of the program, as a result of the friendships made at the lunches. At the first workshop this was less prevalent, although one woman did note that she had encountered another participant at the



grocery store and they had stopped and chatted. This encounter made the woman feel more connected in town.

In the second workshop, there were many stories of volunteers and participants socializing outside of the program. In some cases this involved women seeking each other out and sharing interests such as photography, art or gardening. For example, one woman shared bulbs from her garden with another woman. In another case, it involved seeking out and “checking-in” with someone who has not attended for a few weeks. The program brought together a diverse set of women, both volunteers and lunchers. In the third workshop, one woman stated that she is continually ‘amazed by the diversity of the group’, and that she now socializes with people she would otherwise never meet.

Multiple lunchers lived in the same apartment complex, and one woman said she felt that this program led to “a different level of knowing [the other women who lived in the apartment complex]. I used to know them, but now I *know* them.” These women have started to telephone each other and socialize more at the apartment complex.

2. INCREASED FOOD LITERACY AND DIET CHANGE

According to the lunchers, the program has led to positive changes in diet and food knowledge. At the first workshop, one woman shared that the recipe provided each week showed her how some meals she had thought were difficult are actually easy to prepare. Another noted that the meals gave her new ideas for meals at home. One woman noted that as a single woman she did not often prepare meals, and stated that the meal at the program was the “best meal I will eat all week” and very filling. Others nodded in agreement, and an organizer shared with the group that the meal was intended as a ‘supper’ rather than lunch.

At the second workshop, the enthusiasm for different foods and changes in diet were discussed in more detail. Women noted benefits that they attribute to the program, including: being more creative with food preparation; using new foods that they were introduced to at the program; trying vegetarian foods; and, trying to make more balanced meals. One woman noted that she has struggled with trying to gain weight and since she has attended the program she has gained a few pounds and credits the program for helping her pay more attention to what she is eating.



By the third workshop, the lunchers had shifted away from discussing the food and diet, which could be a sign that these changes in foods were now a common practice for some regular participants. A participant noted that she felt happier overall with her healthy changes. The organizers hired a new chef to prepare the meals, which was well received by everyone in the workshop. The organizers expressed an interest in continuing with the chef in the kitchen.

3. BARRIERS FOR PARTICIPATION

Size of the program

Organizers and lunchers identified the need to reach out to more women who may benefit from the program. Although the program continues to increase in number of participants, there is a tension between getting bigger to benefit more women and staying small enough to have the social benefits noted above. A discussion between an organizer and a participant in the third workshop highlights this tension. The organizer noted that for her, an ideal size would be 100 women, as the space is big enough to accommodate that number. A luncher noted that she would be uncomfortable in such a big group. She shared that “When I started I was not comfortable with the people who are here and now it’s comfortable”. This tension could be a result of different goals of each participant (e.g. nutrition versus social connections), or of different levels of comfort in social situations.

The program name and language

The language used in the promotional material for the program may be disempowering for some. The program name (“Ladies Who Lunch”) was considered ‘snobby’ by one woman and for another woman evoked images of women dressed in fancy clothing having tea (references were made to the ‘Red Hat Society’). Many noted the negative language on the various promotional materials. One woman spoke privately to the researcher after the second workshop, saying she felt marginalized by the language on the promotional materials and thought that the phrasing was insensitive. For example, the mission statement on the website stated until early November:

*The mission of **Ladies Who Lunch!** is: To reduce the isolation and improve both the physical and mental health of women who are isolated due to poverty, lack of childcare, a physical or mental disability such as*



depression, language barrier or any other reason.
(<http://cwladieswholunch.ca>, 2014)

This (original) language uses negative words such as isolation, depression, disability, and participants may not want to be associated with these negative traits. Based on this feedback from participants, changes were made to the program outreach materials. By the third workshop in December 2014, steps had been made to move to positive language. For example, on the website, the words “Food, Conversation, Fun” (ibid) were prominently displayed in the header, and the mission statement has now been removed.

Location of the program

For some participants, there is a lack of clarity about the group that is involved in running the program and where the funding comes from. One woman noted the location of the program in a church might mislead women into thinking it is a religious program and may be a deterrent for some women. She stated that no matter how she tries to describe it to potential participants, it comes across sounding like a church event. Another woman noted that “no one likes to be preached to” while they are eating lunch. In the final workshop, one participant shared that the saying of grace was a problem since it gave the impression that it was a religious program. Other women disagreed, and the leader in the grace noted that she made it clear to women that they did not have to participate in the grace if they did not want to.

4. PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Roles in the program

At all three workshops, the researchers noted that there were a few key volunteers who both took responsibility for the majority of the cooking, set-up and clean-up work, as well as for the decision-making in the program. Hiring a chef by the time of the final workshop did relieve this burden somewhat. At the final workshop, one volunteer who has been very active noted that she is ready to step back her role to some extent, and encouraged others to take on leadership roles, as she saw many potential leaders in the group. The reliance on a few volunteers to run the program has potential negative consequences, including the potential for burnout by these individual volunteers and the program not being a reflection of the wants and needs of the lunchers. Some of these



tensions were discussed above with the issues of ideal program size and the language used in the program's mission and title.

Lack of stable funding

The program currently has funding until April 2015, but at the time of the final workshop, funding beyond this was unknown.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation research workshops conducted with participants in the LWL program found that the program has social benefits for participants, including increased social connections, a sense of belonging and non-judgment, and a place where participants feel comfortable sharing their stories and issues with others.

The benefits to participants from a diet and nutrition standpoint are harder to capture, but based on the insights from the women they include learning new food skills, eating a better variety of foods and healthier foods.

As the program is still in the first year of running, there are barriers to overcome, including: issues with the program name; the disempowering mission statement for the program; the location of the program in a church; the roles of organizers and lunchers; and, the lack of stable funding.

Due to the fact that not all lunchers and organizers participated in the workshops, and therefore these results do not necessarily reflect the views of all involved in the Ladies Who Lunch program. However, based on the feedback from participants in this evaluation research, four main recommendations are suggested for this program.

1. The name and mission statement of the lunch needs to be revised, and decisions on these changes should be made by participants.
2. Continue to collect participant feedback and create mechanisms to facilitate luncher involvement in program planning decisions (for example, a central committee with participant involvement).
3. Actively work to reduce the association with the church, which includes refraining from saying a group grace prior to eating.



4. Continue to employ a chef (if possible) to reduce the burden on volunteers to prevent burnout.

As the Ladies Who Lunch program model evolves from start-up to sustainability, implementing these changes will further strengthen a program that has shown to have benefits for both the lunchers and the organizers.

REFERENCES

¹World Health Organization. 1948. Preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946; signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948.

Centre Wellington Social Justice Group. 2014. Ladies Who Lunch website: <http://cwladieswholunch.ca>. Accessed on November 7, 2014.



APPENDIX A: WORKSHOP OUTLINE

Goal of Workshop- The goal of this research workshop is to explore why people participate in Ladies Who Lunch and the kinds of outcomes and questions Ladies Who Lunch participants would like to include in the program evaluation.

Time	Activity/Questions
0-8 minutes	Consent Process <ul style="list-style-type: none">- consent form- asking participants not to discuss who was there or what was discussed after the workshop, but say we cannot guarantee confidentiality.
8-12 minutes	Introduction of Facilitator: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- re-iterate: goal of workshop and ability of participants to withdraw and only discuss what they are comfortable sharing- overview of the design of workshop
12-20 minutes	Participants introduce themselves and discuss their goals from their participation in the workshop and from the research
20-40 minutes	Using the goals brought out in the introduction, facilitator guides a discussion of different goals, different views on the LWL program & associated research. Sample questions to guide discussion may include <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Why do you want to participate in the LWL program? Why do others want to participate?- What research questions would you have asked in a survey?- What do you want to get out of this research?
40-55 minutes	Participants come to a group decision regarding research outcomes & questions. Participants are guided to give a final 'participant goals and action plan' to the researcher.