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NourishTank: Participant Experiences and Feedback

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Participant Experiences of an Innovative Program to Address Food Security: NourishTank

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Abstract

NourishTank is a shark-style competition that empowers students to develop innovative, sustainable solutions for combating hunger and ensuring food security. Following the inaugural NourishTank event, participants provided valuable feedback, including an enhanced understanding of hunger issues, improved hard and soft skills, and expressed interest in volunteering. Feedback emphasized academic and personal network channels for awareness and suggestions for improvement related to program refinement and expansion of outreach efforts.

Introduction & Problem Statement

Food insecurity is a major concern in Utah, with 1 in every 11 people being food insecure (Feeding America, 2019). Additionally, the Utah State University (USU) Extension 2023 Statewide Needs Assessment identified food insecurity as a top priority across Utah (Narine, 2023). To address this concern, USU's Hunger Solutions Institute (HSI) developed a unique and innovative program, NourishTank, which aims to spread awareness on issues around hunger among university students, engage students from multiple academic disciplines to collaborate and develop original ways to address food insecurity and invite innovative proposals from student groups to develop into an extension program.

Response & Target Audience

NourishTank is an innovative program USU's Hunger Solutions Institute developed to address food insecurity through student-driven initiatives. Modeled after the Shark Tank concept, NourishTank invites students from various academic disciplines to pitch creative solutions for hunger and nutrition security to a panel of experts. The program fosters awareness of hunger issues, encourages interdisciplinary collaboration, and provides a platform for innovative projects that have the potential to be implemented by the Hunger Solutions Institute. Winning teams receive scholarships and mentorship to bring their projects to life, contributing to long-term, sustainable solutions for food insecurity.

Following the inaugural NourishTank event, participants were contacted and asked to complete a short online survey to share their feedback regarding their experience with the event and process. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on how the program contributed to their understanding of hunger-related issues, develop their people skills, and provide suggestions for potential improvements in future event iterations.

The survey was sent to all 11 teams that participated in NourishTank, which comprised 28 participants. These participants came from 19 fields of study across the University, such as Nutrition and Food Science, Plant Science and Climate, and Global Communication. All the questions were open-ended, and the response rate was 28.5% ($n = 8$).

Outcomes & Impact

A post-event survey was used to understand participants' experiences with the NourishTank program. The survey gathered data on participants' perspectives, the program's impact on their skills, and suggestions for future improvements.

Perspective of Hunger Issues and Food Insecurity: Participants were asked whether they knew the concepts of food and nutrition security before NourishTank and what new they learned while writing proposals on NourishTank. Participants overwhelmingly reported a shift in their perspective after participating in the competition. They mentioned gaining awareness about the prevalence of hunger, existing solutions, and the resources available to combat food insecurity. One participant said, "*Working on [the] NourishTank proposal made me realize food insecurity is extremely real and prevalent and [that] I really can make a difference. Helping to solve hunger issues is a more attainable career goal now.*" Some participants also mentioned feeling empowered to make a difference and considering a career focused on solving hunger issues.

Program impact on improving participants' people skills: Participants were asked how participating in NourishTank impacted their experience as a college student and how it influenced their education and skills. Responses fell within two areas: hard skills (e.g., learning secondary data review, proposal writing, budget-writing) and soft skills (e.g., leadership, teamwork, networking, presentation). First, for hard skills, most participants indicated that the competition had a positive impact, broadening their horizons, providing valuable experience in writing proposals, presenting projects, verbal communication, and aligning with their career goals. Almost all participants mentioned that the program experience is an excellent addition to their resume.

Participants indicated that the program helped them develop essential soft skills, mainly working in teams, critical thinking, networking, and presentation skills. Working in teams was particularly emphasized as an enjoyable and rewarding experience, with several participants noting improvement in their presentation skills, especially in front of field experts.

Interest in Volunteering with Hunger Solutions: Participants were asked if they would like to volunteer with Hunger Solutions Institute in this section. Several participants expressed interest in volunteering with the Hunger Solutions Institute. One of the participants mentioned, "*The possibility that my idea could become a reality, and I could work with professionals in an area that makes me excited!*" Participants willingly shared their email addresses, indicating a desire to further engage with food insecurity initiatives.

Awareness and Engagement in NourishTank program: Participants were asked how they learned about the program. This feedback was helpful in understanding how we can market the program in the future. Their responses indicate that awareness of the NourishTank competition was primarily facilitated through academic channels, such as incorporating the program requirements in class projects, assignments, and syllabi. Personal networks and campus advertising also played a significant role in disseminating information about the competition.

The involvement of faculty members and peers highlights the importance of institutional support in promoting participation in initiatives like NourishTank.

Overall feedback for program improvement: Finally, we asked participants for feedback on improving NourishTank. Participants offered a variety of suggestions, such as limiting the time allotted for judges' questions, offering training sessions on topics like budgeting throughout the program period, scheduling the main event at the end of the semester to allow more time for project development, and providing constructive feedback from experts during the proposal phase. Additionally, one participant recommended sharing rubric scores and feedback from the judges after the event.

Most participants appreciated the effort put into organizing the event. Some participants mentioned that they enjoyed presenting projects and experiencing a formal "Shark Tank" atmosphere. They also mentioned that they welcomed the experts' initial review of proposals, which helped them improve their program ideas.

Public Value & Next Steps

Overall, the post-event evaluation results reflect the event's positive impact in raising awareness about hunger issues, fostering teamwork skills, and providing valuable educational experiences for college students. However, participants also suggested areas for improvement, which could enhance the effectiveness and enjoyment of future competitions.

Based on the feedback, the next step is to refine and enhance the NourishTank program to better meet participants' needs. We plan to focus on revisiting the competition structure to incorporate suggestions for improvement. This will likely involve refining the judging process and offering additional support for project development, including assistance with project budgets and guidance on proposal creation. These enhancements aim to make NourishTank even more impactful and supportive for all participants.

While not a focus of our evaluation, we recognize the need to increase participation and engagement further. We plan to expand our outreach efforts to reach a broader audience of students from diverse backgrounds and academic disciplines. By strengthening collaboration with student organizations and academic departments, we hope to promote the program more widely and encourage greater participation. As one participant stated, "*Just keep the program going! This is one of those projects that, as time moves forward, will make great impacts.*" This sentiment highlights the potential of NourishTank to create lasting change and inspire future leaders in the fight against hunger.

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