

Hunger Relief in Northwest Arkansas: The Cobblestone Project Harvest Share Subscription Program

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The Cobblestone Project

- The Cobblestone Project is a nonprofit in the Northwest Arkansas area with the mission to 'identify needs, connect needs with resources, and fulfill needs with sustainable solutions' (The Cobblestone Project 2014)
- One of The Cobblestone Project's initiatives is *The Farm*, which works to meet hunger needs in NWA by growing and donating local produce and by offering agricultural education.

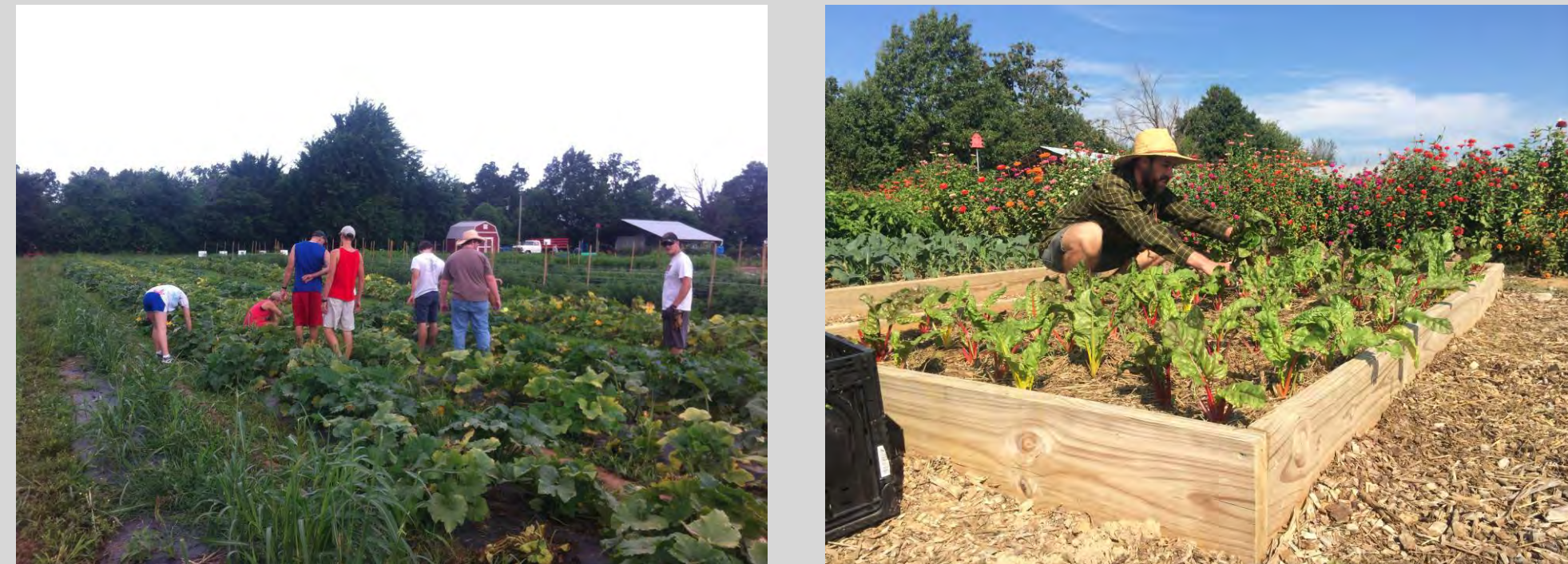


Photo courtesy of the Cobblestone Project
Left: Volunteers harvesting onions and squash on *The Farm*. Right: Assistant Farm Manager, Sean Coder, harvesting chard for the Harvest Share lug.

Harvest Share Subscription Program

- The Cobblestone Project relies on volunteers, donations, and grants to operate *The Farm* and donate food.
- An important source of donations for *The Farm* comes from its Harvest Share Subscription Program in which people donate money and in return get a box of food items each week throughout the growing season.
- The purpose of this study was to better understand the needs of the subscribers as well as the overall satisfaction with the weekly 'lug,' the food delivered from *The Farm* to the subscribers.
- Understanding this will help The Cobblestone Project attract more subscribers to their program and ensure continued subscription from current subscribers, which will ensure the funding and survival of *The Farm*.

Food Security

- The USDA's 2014 food insecurity survey showed that 14.3 percent of the households in the United States were food insecure, meaning 17.5 million households did not have access to enough food for all household members to maintain normal activity or health (Coleman-Jenson, Gregory, Singh 2014).
- In 2013, Arkansas has the highest level of food insecurity of all the states with 21.2 percent of its households being food insecure (margin of error 3.02).
- As the population of the area has shifted and dramatically grown over the last 30 years homelessness, poverty, and, therefore, the threat of food in security has grown in the area.
- Studies by the University of Arkansas' Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice show high numbers of homelessness and food insecurity which indicate a high need for a sustainable hunger relief system in the NWA community.
- The Cobblestone Project works to combat Food insecurity in NWA through the donation of fresh, locally grown food items.

Methods

- The study was conducted through a series of three surveys – an introductory survey, a set of bi-weekly surveys, and a final survey – that were sent out to subscribers through Qualtrics.
- The first part of the three-part survey series was a 16-question introductory survey that gathered demographic information about the subscribers to help the Cobblestone Project understand the basic characteristics – including race, income, employment status, and family size.
- The second part of the series involved a set of 11 bi-weekly surveys that were approximately 65 questions each. These surveys were sent to subscribers from May to October to assess their satisfaction with their food lugs (based on quality and quantity) over each two-week period.
- The third part of the series was a 15-question final survey that gauged overall satisfaction with their subscription and focused on general satisfaction with each of the types of food items and likelihood of the subscriber to join the program for the 2015 season.
- Due to low survey response rates, various tactics were used throughout the summer to try to increase subscriber participation such as letter-writing, phone calls, paper copies of surveys delivered with the lug, and a Wrap-up event where subscription donors and hunger relief agencies were encouraged to meet each other and understand the larger picture of *The Farm*.



Photo courtesy of the Cobblestone Project



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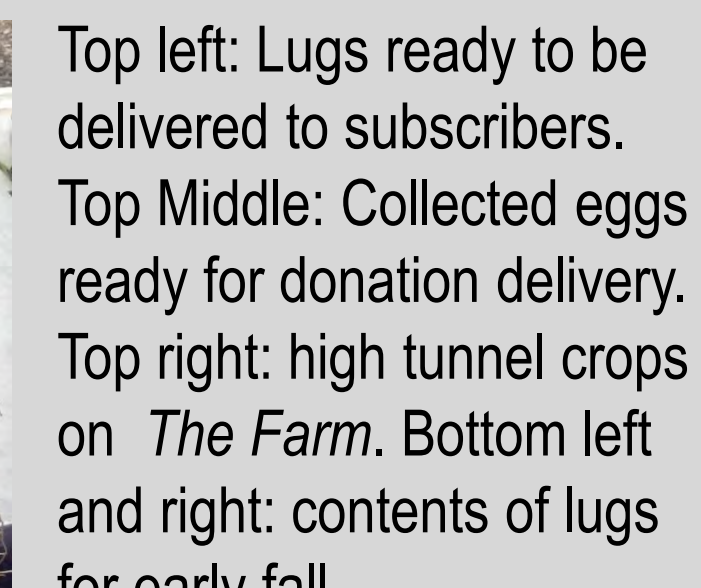


Photo courtesy of the Cobblestone Project

Far left: melons harvested from The Farm. Second to the left: The Cobblestone Project's chicken coop. Second to the right: Research interns for the Cobblestone Project address subscribers and donation recipients at the Wrap-Up Event at The Farmer's Table. Far right: Coolers of food ready to be brought to hunger relief agencies in NWA.

Results

- The average response rate was 4.1 respondents per survey out of 23 subscribers, which indicates that survey methods should be changed for future contact with subscribers, possibly by reducing the number of surveys.
- Overall satisfaction rates on the bi-weekly surveys were very high with respondents indicating high satisfaction with quantity and quality (see below table) levels of product freshness, timeliness, and condition. The largest problems indicated was food waste due to wilted items (usually leafy greens), rotten items (usually tomatoes), and too large a quantity of unusual food items, but these complaints were minimal compared to the positive reviews of the subscription program.
- The final survey showed that only 25 percent of respondents were likely or very likely to subscribe again for the 2015 Harvest Share Subscription Program, where as 75 percent were unsure, unlikely, or very unlikely to subscribe again. Due to the high level of satisfaction indicated in the surveys and because the cost of the subscription is going down for the next season, it is likely due to the intended switch from delivery to pick-up of the weekly lugs that is causing the potential loss of current subscribers.
- Overall, subscribers were very satisfied with their interactions with the Cobblestone Project and their weekly food lug but the Cobblestone Project could improve by changing the variety of foods they grow to include more staple pantry items (like onions, potatoes, and corn) and to provide recipes for subscribers to help reduce waste of unusual or plentiful food items.



Top left: Lugs ready to be delivered to subscribers.
Top Middle: Collected eggs ready for donation delivery.
Top right: high tunnel crops on *The Farm*. Bottom left and right: contents of lugs for early fall.

	Average Level of Quantity Satisfaction (in Percentage of Responses)	Average Level of Quality Satisfaction (in Percentage of Responses)
Number of Responses	4.1	4.1
Very Satisfied	42	44
Satisfied	31	36
Somewhat Satisfied	10	7
Neutral	12	7
Somewhat Dissatisfied	2	3
Dissatisfied	1	2
Very Dissatisfied	2	2

Sustainability

Social Sustainability

- Social sustainability is based on the universal principles of human wellbeing, equity, democratic governance, and a democratic civil society and focuses on people's ability to thrive as well as survive
- By growing local food for local people, they have helped build a community in Northwest Arkansas that "maximizes self-reliance, social justice, and sovereignty" (Smith 1993: 1416). This system they've created not only works to alleviate the social justice issue of poverty and hunger, but also has the power to create a stronger community by producing its own food and relying less on outside powers for sustenance.

Managed Sustainability

- Managed systems sustainability focuses on the sustainability of business and agricultural operations.
- The Cobblestone Project has worked to increase the sustainability of their operations in order to meet the food security needs of NWA.
- Cobblestone has done this both by choosing sustainable agriculture techniques (like organic practices) and by increasing the efficiency of their food distribution (through improved food distribution techniques and variety of items grown).

This study on the Cobblestone Project's Harvest Share Subscription Program will help the program become more sustainable in future years by providing knowledge of the needs of subscribers that will allow the Cobblestone Project to improve their program to ensure that subscribers continue donating, which in turn allows Cobblestone to continue providing hunger relief to the community and increase to social and managed sustainability of NWA.

Reflections/Future Work

- Though response rates were low, this series of surveys helped pinpoint potential improvements for *The Farm* and highlighted the high quality of the Harvest Share Subscription Program.
- The Cobblestone Project's role in hunger relief and social sustainability in NWA is important, and future research into the subscription program pick-up system and any future changes in food variety would help ensure donations and subscription rates.

Important References

- The Cobblestone Project. "Our Mission." *Cobblestone Project*. Web. 28 Nov. 2014. <http://www.cobblestoneproject.org/>
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- Smith, Vincent M., Robert B. Greene, and Janet Silbernagel. "The Social and Spatial Dynamics of Community Food Production: A Landscape Approach to Policy and Program Development." *Landscape Ecology in Practice* 28 (2013): 1415-1426. Print.

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