



Detecting food pantry clients' needs post-COVID-19: A project design for future service-learning courses

Shaoping Qiu (Postdoc)

Shaoping Qiu obtained his Ph.D. in Human Resource Development from Texas A& M University. Currently, he is a Postdoctoral Researcher in the College of Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution, Texas A&M University. His research interests include human resource development, organizational leadership, organizational change, stress and well-being, service-learning, and quantitative methods such as multiple regression, structural equation modelling (SEM), hierarchical linear model (HLM), and item response theory (IRT).

Malini Natarajarathinam (Associate Professor)

Dr. Malini Natarajarathinam received her Ph.D. in Operations Management from The University of Alabama in 2007. Dr. Natarajarathinam joined the Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution at Texas A&M University as an Assistant Professor in 2007. Dr. Natarajarathinam teaches undergraduate and graduate capstone courses. She also teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in logistics, distribution, purchasing, supplier, and customer relationship management. She developed the distribution customer experience course for the graduate program and she has made significant curriculum changes to several courses in the department. Dr. Natarajarathinam's research focuses on engineering education including service-learning and workforce skills development. She has received over \$3.6 million in external research funding from several companies, governmental agencies, and National Science Foundation. Dr. Natarajarathinam has written 22 peer-reviewed journal articles, a business case with a teaching note, 63 peer-reviewed conference proceedings, and was the keynote speaker at the food banks Conference. She works with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in developing innovative Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses in logistics and distribution. Dr. Natarajarathinam has chaired 91 graduate capstone projects, and several undergraduate capstone projects, and has served on two master's committees. Dr. Natarajarathinam was chosen as one of the "40 under 40" faculty by the American Society of Engineering Educators, Prism Magazine in 2018.

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Dr. Shaoping Qiu, Texas A&M University

Shaoping Qiu, Ph.D. is a postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Engineering Technology and Industrial Distribution, Texas A&M University. His research interests include organizational leadership, organizational change, stress and well-being, training & development, service-learning, and quantitative methods such as multiple regression, structural equation modelling (SEM), hierarchical linear model (HLM), and item response theory (IRT).

Dr. Malini Natarajarathinam, Texas A&M University

Dr. Malini Natarajarathinam joined the faculty of Industrial Distribution Program at Texas A&M University in 2007. Natarajarathinam received her Ph.D. in Supply Chain Management from The University of Alabama. She received her Bachelor of Engineering (Major: Industrial and Systems Engineering) from Anna University [Tamilnadu, India], her MS in Industrial Engineering from Auburn University, her MA in Management Science and MS in Applied Statistics from The University of Alabama. She has experience working with many industries such as automotive, chemical distribution etc. on transportation and operations management projects. She works extensively with food banks and food pantries on supply chain management and logistics focused initiatives. Her graduate and undergraduate students are integral part of her service-learning based logistics classes. She teaches courses in strategic relationships among industrial distributors and distribution logistics. Her recent research focuses on engineering education and learning sciences with a focus on how to engage students better to prepare their minds for the future. Her other research interests include empirical studies to assess impact of good supply chain practices such as coordinated decision making in stochastic supply chains, handling supply chains during times of crisis and optimizing global supply chains on the financial health of a company. She has published her research in Journal of Business Logistics, International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management and peer-reviewed proceedings of the American Society for Engineering Education.

Abstract: Previously, we partnered with food banks to design a service-learning course in our Industrial Distribution Program to help food pantries deliver food and solve their operational problems. However, students complained that we did not provide well-defined problems for students to solve in this course. They suggested that we provide well-designed processes, activities, and pre-designed tools so that they can save much time and focus on better serving the clients. For this purpose, we participated in a Houston Food Bank (HFB) Needs Assessment project. Apart from helping the HFB to determine the needs of the clients and HFB post-COVID-19, this project was also designed to provide a roadmap for future service-learning courses to follow. This project was conducted in the summer of 2021. The project team consisted of members from Industrial Distribution Program and HFB. To design the project, we discussed the issues, identified agencies and clients, decided on data collection methods, formulated focus group questions, and chose survey instruments. We implemented the data collection and analyzed the data, followed by writing a report and presenting the results. In addition to providing a guideline for food banks and pantries to distribute food, this project can be used to design better service-learning courses in Industrial Distribution Program that can enhance community impact. The next step is that in the fall semester of 2021, we launched another food insecurity service-learning course that followed our project design and execution to avoid the aforementioned issues, allowing food agencies and students to better serve the communities.

Key Words: Course design, food bank, service-learning.

Background

In 2020, 10.5 percent of U.S. households (13.8 million households) experienced food insecurity [1]. The rate of food insecurity in Texas is higher than in most other states. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Texas is among the nine highest states of food insecurity with a prevalence rate of 13.3 percent. The situation is more severe in some of Texas's rural communities. Due to a lack of money and other resources, households with low and very low food security have difficulty in providing enough food for their family members at some time during the year. Food insecurity is closely related to poor health among children, adults, and the elderly [2]. Multiple studies have shown that limited access to adequate food leads to impaired cognition and behavioral and mental health problems among children [3-5]. Food insecurity is also one of the causes of depression and poor overall health among older community members [6]. For those who experience food insecurity, food banks and pantries can be a vital resource to improve access to food.

To help tackle the above food insecurity issues, we previously partnered with food banks to design a service-learning course in our Industrial Distribution Program to help food pantries deliver food and solve their operational problems. The purpose of the course was to increase students' awareness of food insecurity, utilize their industrial distribution expertise, raise their social responsibility, and enhance civic-mindedness by tackling food insecurity issues. The outcome was that students recommended solutions to improve operational efficiency so that they can use their technical skills to address the challenges and make an impact on the communities. Service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility [7]. The benefits of service-learning are reciprocal among the students (service-giver), the institute (facilitator), and the service-receiver [8, 9]. For students, service-learning positively impacts students' course satisfaction, academic performance, critical thinking skills, civic engagement, morale-building. It also enhances students' professional skills such as leadership, teamwork, and cultural competence communication, leadership develops collaboration that is deemed indispensable in the 21st century [10].

This interdisciplinary service-learning course worked directly with community partners (food pantries) to address disparities in food access and food security in the state of Texas. Student groups collaborated with agencies to learn more about their community, identify the needs, and provide effective, well-researched solutions that can improve the efficiency of their operations. Feedback from students and foodbank agencies indicated that they gained access to large-scale societal issues since their network cover many counties in Texas. Through the service-learning project, Students applied existing and newly gained knowledge to a real-world situation while working with students from different academic majors, and improving their civic engagement by assessing the needs of food banks and agencies and proposing ethical yet effective solutions.

However, students complained about unexpected workload, unclear course requirements, as well as the need for an in-person visit with the food pantry. The feedback also included that we did not provide well-defined problems for students to solve in this course. They suggested that we provide well-designed processes, activities, and pre-designed tools so that they can save much time and focus on better serving the clients. To address these issues, we launched another

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan for data collection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Choose instruments, ☐ Post survey on Qualtrics, ☐ Hard copy print-out, ☐ Translation of survey, ☐ Focus group question, ☐ Obtaining information about clients | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus group meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Share preparation material, ☐ Identify clients, ☐ Revise survey instruments, ☐ Collect data from Focus group discussion | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect data from the survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Agencies distribute the survey, ☐ Survey follow up, ☐ Agencies assisting to collect survey data | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐ Analyze data using soft wares, ☐ Detect the needs of both agencies and clients | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write-up report | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present data | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Listening to Community Voice

Listening to the voice of agencies and their clients is also critical because we need to make sure that the voice and needs of the community are included to provide well-defined problems to be solved in this project. About two months before the beginning of the project, we communicated with the HFB, selected agencies, and visited some agency locations. As mentioned in the preparation stage, HFB was involved to define the scope of the project, editing necessary documents to reflect current initiatives and goals, provided information of their agencies. To listen to the community’s voice, we selected the appropriate agencies to do this project. We scheduled communications with agencies via zoom meetings or visited some agencies to listen to their voices. To ensure that communication remains open and consistent, we selected a manager in HFB as a communication liaison, connecting agencies, HFB, and us.

Decided on data collection methods and formulated focus group questions

Based on the input of agencies and clients, we developed a list of assessment criteria and determined the project methods. We decided to use three methods to collect data: Focus group, survey, and Telephone interview. We intended to survey clients while doing a focus group with selected agencies. There are a large proportion of clients of Hispanic/Latino origin, who have difficulties reading English. Therefore, we developed both English and Spanish versions for our survey. Based on the population of the clients, we expected to survey 300 clients and to hold a focus group with 13 agencies. Focus group questions asked agencies to identify what is working well now and what can be done better. This data collection method was based on a Plus-Delta

approach to evaluate what works (+) and what can be improved (D). Focus group questions can be found in Appendix 1.

Survey for clients and community members to assess the current state of (a) food insecurity, (b) Health and economic conditions (with a focus on food insecurity and poverty), (c) Resources available for community members, (d) Access to nutritional food, food resources and support services aimed at improving quality of life, and (e) Use of other community-led support initiatives. See Appendix 2 and 3 for survey questions for both the English version and Spanish version. Telephone interview with some agencies concerns data confirmation.

Implemented the data collection

Participation in the survey and focus group is voluntary. Survey data were collected by distributing a hard copy to clients who came to the agencies for food. On-line Qualtrics surveys were also created for both clients and agencies, but no responses were received. Therefore, we relied on the hard copy to collect the data. There are 26 active agencies in these three counties. For the survey, agencies distributed to the clients whenever they came to collect food in early June. Agencies then collected the surveys and mailed them to us. One month later, we received 381 surveys from nine agencies. We discussed with HFB to select 13 agencies to participate in our focus group based on their activities and time schedules. However, it turned out that it was hard for us to find a common availability for them to get together. So, we distributed hard copies with the questions, expecting them to answer. A total of nine agencies responded. We conducted further telephone interviews to confirm their answers.

Analyzed the data.

This project used both qualitative and quantitative methods. For qualitative data, we extracted salient themes related to clients' food access. For quantitative data, we used SPSS to calculate clients' satisfaction and frequencies for food insecurity, health and economic conditions, resources available, food access, and use of community-led support initiatives. We also used AVONA to compare food insecurity and health conditions in terms of race, ethnicity, and county. When analyzing the data, we found that for each survey question, the numbers of responding participants are different, resulting in some missing data.

To guide the future students' capstone course, we presented our results to give them more information so that they cope with the difficulties and challenges and deal with clients' problems. Our analyses showed that 228 clients (78%) reported they are white while 46 (16%) are black. Among the clients who responded, 70% reported that the highest education in their family is 9-12 years education or a GED while 18% said college education or above. Most of them (57%) reported that one of their family members is currently employed. About 29 % family have one member working. Most clients are satisfied with food quality (95%), amount (92%), variety (91%), and frequency of service (92%) across all counties. Clients suffer from diseases or illnesses such as diabetes, heart diseases, high blood pressure, COPD, cancer, back pain, arthritis, asthma, stroke, seizure, and others. Diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and COPD are the most mentioned health concerns. Financial stress (41%) and mental stress (40%) are reported to be the most prevalent COVID impact clients are currently experiencing, followed by loss of job (29%) and loss of family members (13%).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people lost jobs and thus are suffering from financial stress and mental stress, and their health has deteriorated. To mitigate these impacts, they need the following services: prescription assistance, access to food stamps, mental health services, eating better classes, computer literacy classes, GED class, cooking healthy classes, ESL class, personal finance management classes, job training sessions, rehab services, immunization clinics. Prescription assistance, access to food stamps, mental health services, eating better classes are the top four needed programs. Some agencies already have some of the above programs in place.

Agencies' response results showed that clients without transportation are one of the barriers existing for clients to get food from agencies. Lack of facilities to keep items cold and need more money to run the pantry. Some agencies do not have enough volunteers to help to provide service and need more volunteers. While some agencies would like to consider opening more days/hours to meet the clients' needs, they do not have the capacity or more volunteers to do so. To recruit more volunteers, they reach out to churches, schools, home school groups, and local nonprofit organizations.

Writing a report and presenting the results

Based on the results of our analysis, we drafted the executive summary and report. Then, we went to an agency to present the project results. There are some points we paid special attention to. First, we focused on the report and assure the project questions are addressed. For example, in our report, we used demographic information because this is important for HFB to understand the clients' situations in three counties, such as income, education, age, race, ethnicity, and health. Second, be objective about the results and it is inappropriate to make predictive statements about the situations of the clients. Third, clearly state the points you make. Fourth, if possible, use tables or graphs to convey what they are supposed to convey. Fifth, communicate with HFB and involve them in our writing. After discussing with HFB, we chose a date to get it presented.

Lessons Learned from the Project

There are some lessons we learned in conducting this project. First, results might be biased due to the large proportion of elders we recruited. As mentioned before, agencies distributed the survey to clients. Generally, elders in the families most likely went to the agencies to collect the food. To eliminate this bias, students participating in later food bank projects should pay more attention to reaching out to as many clients as possible. They might need to go to clients' places to collect the data if possible. Second, how to organize a focus group was a challenge because of different schedules. Usually, agencies are busy traveling around across counties. Therefore, communication, coordination, and patience are critical to setting up a schedule for all the representatives of agencies. Third, the methods for data collection constituted another challenge. Because our participants are special disadvantaged groups, we should consider the availability of the internet and computers of the clients, educational level, their health, and other obstacles. Fourth, the clients are generally poor and disadvantaged, resulting in low self-esteem among most community members. When working with them, we need to show our respect and courtesy and should not hurt their feeling and dignity.

Address the Issues

Based on previous students' feedback, we have made several adjustments in this project structure/design so it is more streamlined and organized. First, to answer students' complaints about unexpected workload, unclear course requirements, as well as the need for an in-person visit with food pantry agencies. We held several zoom meetings with HFB and agencies and paid a couple of visits to HFB and agencies at the beginning of the project. We got a chance to meet and build a personal connection with agency liaisons at the early stage of the project. Thus, we would obtain an idea of what the HFB expected of us. Therefore, we were aware of project expectations, deliverables, and their impact on clients. Secondly, although we had task assignment responsibilities for both agency and us, we were aware that there was still a lack of engagement and communication issues between both parties. For this reason, we decided to have a manager from HFB as our liaison to connect agencies and us. Liaison is very important because she knows agencies very well.

Thirdly, in our previous service-learning food bank project, we did not provide well-defined problems for students to solve; instead, students needed to communicate with their agency liaisons to explore the pantry's needs. Students had difficulties and challenges when solving ill-defined and open-ended problems. Based on the feedback, we changed the problem-solving process by providing pre-defined problems first. In several meetings prior to the project, we asked HFB and food agencies to list two or three most prominent problems they would like to solve, along with some demographic questions. With this information, we brainstormed together and picked problems for each agency. We planned to combine and reduce some of the written assignments for future students. This way the students would be able to invest more time and energy into investigating the problem and proposing effective solutions.

Conclusions and Next Steps

In addition to providing a guideline for food banks and pantries to distribute food, this project can be used to guide better service-learning course design in Industrial Distribution Program that can enhance community impact. This project provided well-designed processes, activities, and pre-designed tools for the students to follow. In the fall semester of 2021, we launched another food insecurity service-learning course that followed our project design and execution to avoid the aforementioned issues. The purpose and the outcome were kept the same as the previous course. Students recommend solutions to improve operational efficiency so that they can use their technical skills to address the challenges and make an impact on the communities. The goal was to increase students' awareness of food insecurity, utilize their industrial distribution expertise, raise their social responsibility, and enhance civic-mindedness by tackling food insecurity issues.

This project guided the fall semester food security service-learning course in several aspects. First, we provided well-designed processes and activities in this project. Students enrolled in the fall semester course followed the same processes to help food banks and pantries to identify clients' needs in other communities post-COVID-19. Second, we also clearly presented what statistical tools and methods to be used to analyze the data. Students were encouraged to utilize the same tools and methods to conduct the analysis. Third, this project set a good example for students to communicate with food banks and agencies. In the fall semester, students knew what was expected of them and what activities they needed to perform to meet the needs. Also, we set clear expectations and assignments to be submitted so that they had more time to engage in the project without confusion and unexpected workload.

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Appendix 1 Focus Group Questions for Agencies

1. Could you describe your clients' demographics? During the last year, how many households and people did you service?
2. Do you have enough volunteers to help to provide service? How do you improve to recruit volunteers?
3. How did you get information from clients what they need? Are there any households that need service but are not serviced?
4. What do you think of the food you provide to the clients in terms of quality, amount, and variety of food?
5. Would you like to consider opening an additional day/hour? Would you accommodate clients' need to come more than once a month/week?
6. How do you cooperate and coordinate with other agencies and community organizations to better serve your clients?
7. From your experience, what barriers existed for clients to get food from pantries? How did you overcome these barriers to improve food delivery service?
8. What are other challenges you face in providing food to your clients? How do you tackle these challenges?
9. In addition to the foodservice, what other services do you currently offer to clients?
10. What other programs do you need to provide better services to your clients?

Appendix 2 Survey Questions for Clients (English)

Name of food service organization: _____

Q1. Questions about you and family

1. Age: _____ 2. Gender: Male () Female () Other ()
 3. Native Language: _____ 4. Zipcode of your residence: _____
 5. Race/Ethnicity: 6. Hispanic/Latino Origin: Yes / No
 American Indian () Asian () Black () White () Other _____
 7. Ages in your household: *Children (Less than 17)* [] *Adults(18 -65)* [] *Seniors (65+)* []
 8. Highest level of education in your household: _____ 9. Number of children in school: _____
 10. Number of your family members currently employed: _____
 11. Monthly income for your household: _____
 12. Do any of your family members have health concerns? Yes () No ().
 13. If yes, please state your family’s health issues and challenges.

Q2. Are you satisfied with the following services the pantry provides? (Click “√” in the bracket)

| | Very satisfied | Satisfied | Unsatisfied | Very unsatisfied |
|-------------------------|----------------|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| 1. Quality of food | () | () | () | () |
| 2. Amount of food | () | () | () | () |
| 3. Variety of food | () | () | () | () |
| 4. Frequency of Service | () | () | () | () |

Q3. How has COVID-19 impacted you and your family?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of job | <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of family members |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial stress | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental stress |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of access to transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of access to health services |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increased caregiving responsibilities | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of access to housing |

Others: _____

Q4. Do you know of other sources of food assistance in case of an emergency need? Yes () | No ()

Q5. In addition to pantry services, what other program do you and your family need?

PLEASE CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> GED classes | <input type="checkbox"/> ESL classes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personal finance management classes | <input type="checkbox"/> Access to food stamps |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cooking healthy classes | <input type="checkbox"/> Eating better classes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rehab services | <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health services |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prescription assistance | <input type="checkbox"/> Immunization clinics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Job training sessions | <input type="checkbox"/> Computer literacy classes |

Other topics of interest: _____

Q6. Any additional comments about how the pantry can serve you better:

Appendix 3 Survey Questions for Clients (Spanish)

Nombre del proveedor de Servicio de Alimentos: _____

P1: Preguntas acerca de usted y su familia

1. Edad: _____
2. Género: Masculino () Femenino: () Otro: ()
3. Lengua materna: _____
4. Código Postal de su domicilio: _____
5. Raza/Origen Etnico:
Nativo Americano () Asiático () Afrodescendiente () Blanco () Otro () _____
6. De origen Hispano/Latino: Si / No
7. Edades en su hogar: Niños (menores de 17 años) [] Adultos (entre 18 y 65 años) []
Personas de la tercera edad (adultos mayores a 65 años) []
8. El más alto grado de educación en su hogar: _____
9. Número de niños en edad escolar: _____
10. Número de los miembros de su familia con trabajo fijo: _____
11. Ingreso mensual en su hogar: _____
12. Hay algún miembro en su familia que tenga problemas de salud: Si () No ().
13. Si su respuesta es afirmativa a la pregunta numero 12, por favor enumere los problemas y retos médicos. _____

P2: ¿Está satisfecho con los siguientes servicios que la alacena provee? (Clic "✓" en el paréntesis)

| | Muy satisfecho | Satisfecho | Insatisfecho | Muy insatisfecho |
|------------------------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------------------|
| 1. Calidad de los alimentos | () | () | () | () |
| 2. Cantidad de los alimentos | () | () | () | () |
| 3. Variedad de los alimentos | () | () | () | () |
| 4. Frecuencia del Servicio | () | () | () | () |

P3: ¿Cómo ha impactado el COVID-19 a su familia?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pérdida de trabajo | <input type="checkbox"/> Pérdida de un ser querido |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Estrés financiero | <input type="checkbox"/> Estrés mental |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Falta de acceso a transportación | <input type="checkbox"/> Falta de acceso a servicios médicos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aumento de responsabilidades de cuidado | <input type="checkbox"/> Falta de acceso a una vivienda |

Otros: _____

P4: ¿Conoce usted de otras fuentes de asistencia alimenticia en caso de una necesidad emergente?

Si () No ()

P5: Adicionalmente a los servicios de la alacena, ¿qué otro(s) programa(s) usted y su familia requieren? **POR FAVOR, SELECCIONE TODOS LOS QUE APLICAN**

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clases de Desarrollo de Educación General (GED) | <input type="checkbox"/> Clases de Inglés como Segunda Lengua (ESL) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clases de Manejo Personal de Finanzas | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceso a Estampillas de Comida |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clases de Alimentación Saludable | <input type="checkbox"/> Clases para Mejorar la Alimentación |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Servicios de Rehabilitación | <input type="checkbox"/> Servicios de Salud Mental |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asistencia para Medicamentos | <input type="checkbox"/> Clínicas de Vacunación |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entrenamiento para Trabajar | <input type="checkbox"/> Clases de Computación |

Otros tópicos de interés: _____

P6: Algún comentario adicional acerca de cómo la alacena podría ayudar a servirle mejor:
