

Rent Relief: Stories from Succeeding Together 2009-2018

A Project Report

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By

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Abstract

This report reflects my partnership with the non-profit organization Succeeding Together (a fictitious name) in order to complete a thematic analysis on the essays written by participants in a rent relief program. The rent relief program is an assistance program implemented by Succeeding Together twice a year that allows families to earn financial support by completing various application procedures. Families are eligible for the rent relief after drafting and submitting an essay explaining why they need financial assistance and after writing about their experiences with the Succeeding Together programs and how these services have impacted their lives. The key focus of this thematic analysis was to identify the key themes regarding their experiences, struggles, and issues the participants of Succeeding Together faced and that appeared in the essays. For this project, we were also interested in identifying what were the key outcomes of the program and also identifying the strategies families use to combat the high cost of living of Silicon Valley. I conducted a thematic analysis on the 792 essays written for the rent relief program. The essays were written from 2009 to 2018 and described the families' experiences of living in San José and reflected on how the program has impacted their lives. I conducted a systematic sampling strategy where essays were numbered and only odd-numbered essays were analyzed, so only 396 essays were analyzed. Below I present the key findings of this project and the experiences of the people who participated in the rent relief program.

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CHAPTER ONE:

THE PROJECT BEGINS

Introduction

For this project, I partnered with Succeeding Together, a non-profit organization located in San José, to conduct a thematic analysis on the essays written by participants in their rent relief program.¹ The primary objective of this project was to identify key patterns and themes and create a written project report that would be provided to Succeeding Together. The report would detail the experiences of the people who use the program and how the program has impacted the lives of the diverse families who use these services.

Succeeding Together is a non-profit organization located in San José that aims to dismantle the effects of poverty within their community by providing its members with the life skills, education, and empowerment their family members need in order to be well-rounded and better-prepared individuals. This organization seeks to reduce the influence of poverty by providing individuals with the programs and the tools necessary to be confident and economically stable.

The primary objective of this project is to identify the impact of one service Succeeding Together provides to its families by conducting a thematic analysis on the essays written by the participants of their rent relief program. The rent relief program allows Succeeding Together families to earn income that can be used towards rent when they complete various application procedures. In order to apply for the rent relief, the participants of the program need to save 12,000 tickets in order to apply. Next, a member of their household is required to fill in an

¹ Succeeding Together is not the organization's real name. A fictitious name was used in order to protect the confidentiality of the agency and the participants.

application specifying the landlord's information and they need to write a two-page essay on topics they chose from a list of open-ended questions about themselves, their children, or regarding the Succeeding Together program. They need to complete all the steps on time and accurately in order to be able to qualify for rent relief. After all the steps are completed, a check is sent out to the landlord.

This analysis allows Succeeding Together to explore the outcomes of their program and how it impacts the lives of the diverse individuals who use their services. This report presents the results of the 2018 thematic analysis conducted for Succeeding Together. The primary purpose of this analysis is to identify the overarching themes by examining the 792 essays written by the families who participated in the rent relief program and discuss their experiences with Succeeding Together and described the issues that plague their community. The essays were written by participants of the rent relief program from 2009 to 2018.

Background

Succeeding Together is a non-profit organization based in San José that offers day-long programs at different locations around the city. This organization has been active since 1997 and serves low-income families by providing programs and services aimed at improving the self-confidence, financial literacy, and skills of its members. Succeeding Together is mostly made up of 30 part-time staff members and three management team members (Annual Report 2017). The Succeeding Together program primarily operates with the help of volunteers. According to Succeeding Together's annual report, each program has an average of 144 volunteers from the local community that help this organization run their program each Sunday. The organization is primarily funded by contributions and donations from businesses, corporate sponsorships, individual donations, in-kind donations, fundraising, and by grants from the state.

Succeeding Together operates at Lowell Elementary in the San José Unified School District, and at Meadows Elementary, and at Santee Elementary in the Franklin McKinley School District. Family members engage in hands-on activities such as making craft gifts for children in hospitals and nursing homes and preparing and learning about healthy meal choices. Additionally, Succeeding Together offers classes on parental effectiveness, English literacy, financial literacy, health and nutrition, violence prevention, computer education, life classes, the path to college, and STEM education (Succeeding Together 2022). For their participation, families earn tickets that serve as Succeeding Together's currency that they can redeem at the "treasure chest" store for essential household goods, necessities, toys, school supplies, and other valuable and essential household materials. They can save their tickets in the Succeeding Together banking system, allowing them to become familiar with common banking procedures like depositing, withdrawing, and earning interest on the tickets they save in their Succeeding Together bank account. This also allows the children and families to learn about money management and financial literacy. The goal of this organization is to instill self-worth, support the families in becoming self-sufficient, and help the children and adults learn various different life skills that they can use in the real world.

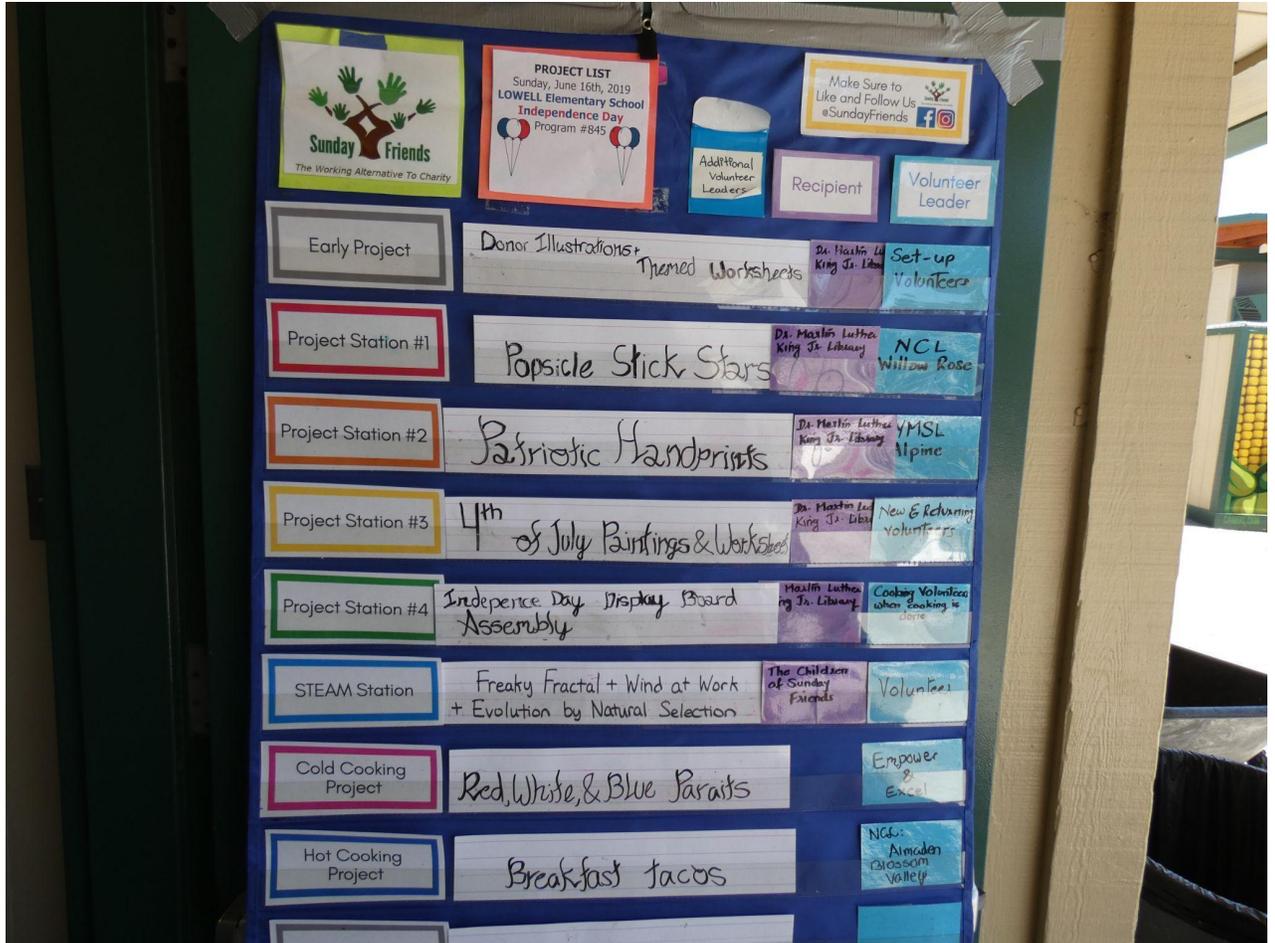


Figure A. The schedule of some of the Succeeding Together projects, programs, and classes the program offered to their families in a program in 2018. In every program, the classes, workshops, and the projects focused on a different topic or theme. For their participation, the families are able to earn tickets that they can use at the “treasure chest” store.

Based on my experience after reading the essays and attending some of the programs, it is evident that Succeeding Together primarily serves Spanish-speaking immigrant families. Many of the organization's members are long-time participants of the program. Some of their members are recent immigrants who seek information regarding services they may be able to access. Many new families to the program learn about Succeeding Together from current members who strongly encourage these individuals to attend the program and explore their services.

The rent relief program is one of many programs Succeeding Together offers. The organization holds events twice a year and it is a program that allows its families to redeem their tickets for money that can go towards rent. While collaborating with their diverse families, they identified that their families were struggling to pay their bills. The rent relief began once Succeeding Together identified that their families needed some sort of financial support in order to pay their rent. Within the essays, families reported a variety of reasons why they were struggling to pay their bills. Some of the primary reasons reported in the essays had to do with the difficulties in accessing well-paying jobs, due to unemployment, because of the high cost of living of Santa Clara County, having to care for family members that had major illnesses or injuries who were unable to work, or because of the financial vulnerability that may have resulted from relying solely on one- or two-income sources. Some of the participants noted that due to the high cost of childcare, many mothers decided to stay home and care for their children, becoming homemakers as a result. However, this decision also put a strain on the household income since the mothers were not contributing to the family's income. Because of this, the Succeeding Together program served as a valuable resource for these families, as they were able to acquire household supplies from the program's store.

These individuals are the people who are living paycheck to paycheck and having a hard time being able to afford their basic needs. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2022), 7.7% of San José's population is living in poverty. Many of the lower-income residents of San José have a hard time being able to afford to live in this area. This led Succeeding Together to create the rent relief program to try to assist their families monetarily in order to provide some temporary financial relief.

Before the families are eligible for the rent relief program, they have to complete several application procedures. First, they have to save a month's worth of tickets in order to apply. Next, they are required to fill out an application specifying the landlord's information and they need to write a two-page paper. The paper must either explain how this relief will impact their family, reflect on their experiences living in Silicon Valley, or describe how the program has impacted their lives and that of their families. They must complete all the steps on time in order to be able to qualify for the rent relief. Once these steps are completed, a check is sent to the landlord to cover part of the rent. The money the families receive varies depending on how many households apply for the relief. Usually, families receive \$150 to \$250 dollars which they can use to cover part of their rent. This relief helps families that are struggling with the high cost of living in San José be able to use their extra income to cover other expenses.

I became involved with Succeeding Together after reaching out to various local non-profit organizations and inquiring about potentially collaborating with them on a project where I could work and learn about the local population and their experiences. I was particularly interested in working on a project with the local Spanish speaking community. I had previously volunteered in the past with Succeeding Together, so I was familiar with their program. After I reached out to Jennifer Brown (pseudonym), who at that time was the Succeeding Together Executive Director, she expressed her interest in collaborating with the Department of Anthropology in order to examine and interpret the data they had acquired from the rent relief program. At that time, Jennifer and the Succeeding Together staff had acquired and translated the essays they received from 2009-2018. Jennifer and I got together in July of 2018 to discuss the organization's goals for the report. This included examining the data and documenting their members' experiences with the program, as well as identifying the major outcomes of their

services. In particular, Succeeding Together specifically requested that the report address the four objectives listed below.

Project Goals

The main objectives for the Succeeding Together project were to:

1. Identify key concepts/themes and the major outcomes of the program
2. Determine how well the qualitative findings compare to the quantitative findings collected by a prior program evaluation completed in 2017
3. Assess trends and changes over the years
4. Identify interview excerpts that the organization can use for letters to the community

The main purpose of this project was to identify the impacts their services, classes, and the programs have made to the families they serve. Succeeding Together had collected nine years worth of essays from the rent relief program, in which members wrote about their experiences, feelings, struggles, and regarding the major contributions the program has made to their lives. This project was important to Succeeding Together because they would use this project report that I would provide to present it to their donors in order to acquire funding for their program. The Succeeding Together program primarily depends on contributions from donors and philanthropic organizations. This report would give the organization insights on which types of services have had the greatest impact and benefited its members the most.

In 2017, Dr. Carol Ann Gittens, Associate Professor of Child Studies, led a yearlong evaluation with her research team of 14 students from Santa Clara University in order to identify if the program was achieving their intended outcomes of educating, development, promoting financial literacy, and promoting academic success among its members. Dr. Carol Ann Gittens'

project primarily focused on surveying 100 participants of the program to conduct a quantitative analysis. In contrast, the project I undertook was a qualitative analysis aimed at exploring the narratives of the participants of Succeeding Together.

This thematic analysis differed significantly from Dr. Gittens' evaluation in that this project analyzed open-ended essays written by participants, where participants tended to write freely and openly regarding an array of diverse topics, their experiences with the program, as well as sometimes detailing personal traumas and issues they face outside the program. This thematic analysis could potentially provide the organization deeper insights into the lives of their participants' and allow the agency to better grasp and understand in detail their members experiences, how they navigate their environment, the way they live, and a first-hand look at the struggles their members face outside of the program over the last nine years in a way that the last program evaluation potentially would not be able to explore. Although many of the participants wrote about the financial impact of the rent relief program, many also shared their experiences with the different programs offered by Succeeding Together and the outcomes of these services. By no means did I mean to replace Dr. Gittens' report with this report, but meant to complement it by providing additional insights on the experiences of the participants.

Project Deliverables

After much discussion with Jennifer Brown, executive director of Succeeding Together, we decided that by December 2018, I would provide a summary report to Succeeding Together with the results of the thematic analysis. The main report would include a summary of the overarching themes present in the essays. The report will also focus on addressing the four main objectives. I would produce a summary that would provide a brief comparison between this qualitative analysis and the quantitative analysis conducted by Dr. Gittens in 2017. In the final

summary report, I would include interview excerpts that recounted the members' experiences with the program. I did not use any identifiable information in order to keep the participants' information confidential. Succeeding Together would be able to use the analysis to present to its donors.

Methods

I began this project in collaboration with Succeeding Together because we wanted to understand the lived experiences of the people who participated in their program and to better understand how it shapes their everyday lives. Additionally, Succeeding Together was interested in identifying how the program has impacted the lives of the diverse families that participate in the program. In this project I did a thematic analysis of the essays participants wrote for their rent relief program. When using this approach, I analyzed interview transcripts or written material and subsequently created codes that correspond to the main ideas or concepts found in the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). I tabulated the codes and organized them to determine the most significant themes, based on the frequency with which they appeared. This approach differs significantly from survey research and other quantitative methods because it is a "bottom-up" approach: the researcher seeks to identify and preserve the conceptual categories articulated by the respondents in their own terms. By contrast, "top-down" approaches tend to impose researchers' categories upon respondents, who often may not be able to express themselves freely. The codes used for this project will be discussed below.

All the essays were collected by the Succeeding Together staff and were dated by the year that they were written. Most of the essays were written in Spanish but translated into English by the Succeeding Together staff. The Succeeding Together staff knew the author's identity of the essays as the participants listed their name when they wrote and submitted their

paper to Succeeding Together. When the Succeeding Together staff translated the essays, they redacted the name of the individual who wrote that essay. I did not receive any information on who wrote the essays; the only people who knew the author's identity were the Succeeding Together staff. No identifiable information was used in any report, and the author's identity would be kept anonymous. Some of the topics the families chose to write about were related to their personal difficulties, earning and financial literacy, improvements in parenting and family unity, children's socialization and education orientation, improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence, the impact of community support, changes in health and nutrition, and the impact of Succeeding Together path to higher learning.

For this analysis, I created broad categories, and specific thematic codes in order to address Succeeding Together's objectives. By coding the essays, prominent themes, topics, or issues could be identified. I read through the essays to identify how frequently certain themes/topics appeared within the essays (see Tabulate Data in Appendix B). Because of the large data size, and because I was the only researcher analyzing the data, I used a systematic sampling approach: all the essays were numbered and only odd-numbered essays were coded and analyzed. In other words, approximately half of the 792 essays were subjected to thematic analysis. I committed to this sampling strategy because of the extensive data Succeeding Together provided and since I was going to analyze, tabulate, and disseminate the findings in a short turnaround time, it was the only plausible way to complete this project and to be able to provide the report to Succeeding Together in a timely manner. Succeeding Together was particularly interested in identifying how children have changed, how parents have changed, what families believe are the causes of those changes, and how they believe the changes will impact their children's future.

Each essay varied in length; they were between one to two pages in length. Essays were written by one family member from each household who participated in the rent relief program. One of the drawbacks of this thematic analysis was that there was no demographic information collected. There was no demographic information collected about the participants of the rent relief program. Despite the lack of demographic information, I will speculate that most essays were written by either a mother or grandmother. When I visited the program, I observed that many of the participants of Succeeding Together were mothers, grandmothers, and children. For future projects, I would encourage Succeeding Together to collect demographic information and for the rent relief essays to be anonymized in order to reduce the risk of bias and dishonesty by the authors of the essays. It leaves some doubt regarding how truthful families were when writing the essays, the participants may be simply writing what they think Succeeding Together wants to hear. After all, many of the families are in a vulnerable position and are in dire need of financial assistance. Because of this, I would advise that the results of this thematic analysis should be interpreted with caution.

Succeeding Together held the rent relief program twice a year. In essence, families from the same household would be able to submit an essay twice a year in order to be eligible for the rent relief. This analysis was important to Succeeding Together because they wanted to identify the impact their services were having on the lives of the families they serve. Furthermore, they would be able to use the data from the thematic analysis to better mold their program in order to meet the needs of their families. It was impossible to determine how many different households participated in the rent relief program as some of the same families throughout the years participated in various editions of the rent relief program. It was possible for the same household to submit two essays in a given year and for the same household to participate in various rent

relief efforts throughout the years. The number of essays submitted to the rent relief program varied from year-to-year (see Table 1 for detail on the number of essays written per year).

I completed the thematic analysis from June 2018 through December 2018 to uncover overarching themes and topics within the essays. For this project, I read through the written materials--essays written by the families who participated at Succeeding Together--and assigned 39 thematic codes (see Codebook in Appendix A for a complete list of codes).

For convenience, the codes were grouped into six broad categories, which were as follow: health challenges and health improvements, financial struggles and success, parenthood and family life, education and self-improvements, support networks, and emotional development of parents and children. Next, subcodes were created and subsequently subdivided into several subcategories (see Tabulated Data in Appendix B for a complete list of codes). The tabulated data demonstrates the number of times each code appeared within the essays and throughout the 2009- 2018 period. Succeeding Together was primarily interested in determining how their program has impacted the lives of their families. Specifically, Succeeding Together wanted to explore what their families reported in regards to: health challenges and improved health habits of their members, financial struggles and successes, parenthood development, childhood and family life, education and self-improvement, and emotional development of parents and children.

Table 1 Number of Succeeding Together Essays (by Year)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total Number of Essays</u>	<u>Number of Sampled Essays (n)</u>
2009	32	16
2010	42	21
2011	62	31
2012	31	16
2013	60	30
2014	54	27
2015	199	99
2016	131	66
2017	122	61
2018	59	29
—	—	—
Totals	792	396

Note: The analysis was drawn from a systematic sample representing 50% of all essays. In other words, 396 out of 792 essays were used for this analysis. The number of essays analyzed for each year is indicated above as "n".

Analysis and Conclusion

This section presents the few themes that stood out from the rest. The essays commonly discussed themes related to: (1) their improved parental engagement with children and educators; (2) the reported improvements in physical and/or mental health; (3) the impact of direct education of parents through Succeeding Together classes and/or consultations; (4) the challenges (paying for housing, obtaining stable and/or full-time employment); (5) the impact of earning basic necessities through Succeeding Together participation. Within the essays, the

members wrote about how they were able to learn a lot from the diverse classes and programs and implement some of those skills at home.

One of the most important themes that appeared within the essays related to how the participants reported the classes encouraged them to play a more active role in their children's education. As one member wrote, *"I feel more involved in my children's education. Now I pay more attention to go and participate in everything related to the school. I go to the lectures and I am always asking the teachers how my children are doing academically and what I can do to support them in the different subjects."*

Families learned on the importance of setting boundaries, encouraging studying, and helping their children with homework. As another member wrote, *"The program has taught me how to be a better mother and showed me how to educate my children. The classes have given me sound knowledge about how to set limits for my children and how to encourage them to study and how to avoid gangs. I have also learned how to help them with homework and how to participate in my children's activities."*



Figure B. Picture of a parent and child working on an academic mathematical game during the Succeeding Together program.

The participants in the program noted that they were provided with resources to improve their physical health. One participant was thankful for the consultations the program provided, *“Thanks to the medical consultations and appointments we attend at the program, my family and I are more aware of our health. In the program, there are professionals who can measure our blood pressure, weight, check our eyesight, and our teeth. Before the program, we never took the time to pay attention to our health.”*

Some members also learned about external mental health services they could access that were extremely useful to their families. Another participant wrote, *“Many classes have changed things for my family and I and we talked about the 211 emergency line and we are thankful for knowing what number to call and ask when my daughter wanted to take pills for depression.*

They helped me quickly to find someone that would come to my house and take my daughter to the hospital. I am thankful I was in that class and learned about this emergency line, it helped my daughter and I a lot. It helped me to protect my daughter and find a place where she could receive therapy for three years.”

Many of the Succeeding Together families were appreciative of the classes, consultations, and services the program provided to its members. One of the most important classes that members listed had to do with the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes the program provides to its participant. As this member noted, *“The classes on English have also been really beneficial for my whole family. Thanks to the English classes here I have been learning so much by reading, writing, and speaking which is also useful for my children since English is spoken and used in many places.”*

The program aimed at giving its members the opportunity to practice and refine their English skills but some of the other classes also aimed at educating and promoting healthy relationships with their children. For example, one mother wrote, *“The classes have helped a lot. Before I couldn't speak English and being Latina, I felt inferior to others and I hardly spoke, I did not study much, I was ignorant and at my children's school, I hardly spoke to the teachers. I grew up in a household where my mother would beat us, scream at us, and tell us we were of no use at all. So I grew up believing this. With a lot of courage, I realized I was doing the same with my children that I adore. The program gives classes that show us how to be good parents and help our children in school and inform us regarding suicide prevention. These classes have helped me ask my children for forgiveness and treat them better. Now, I speak with love and I am always telling them that I love them.”*

Many of the participants of the rent relief wrote about how difficult it was to be able to afford housing in Santa Clara County. One participant wrote, *“I recently lost my job working in a deli and this has been very hard and stressful on me. With the support of the rent relief program, it has made many things possible for me. It has allowed me to have extra money so I can purchase other important things. This includes school supplies for my three children, clothes for my family, and household items for my home. The rent relief has made my life a little bit more manageable. Also, with the financial assistance, I will have some extra cash to pay off some of my bills. Many families wrote about how they were unemployed and behind on their bills, “If I get approved for rent relief it will help my family a lot. At this time, I am not working and we will be able to use this money to pay off the electricity bill because we are behind on all our bills. I have experienced serious trauma because my oldest child was molested. I have a 16-month-old son who I am afraid to leave with a babysitter because of all my stress. I am unable to go back to work and that is why our financial situation is complex.”*

Finally, many individuals wrote about how grateful they were and how important it was for them to be able to earn basic and essential goods at the program. Many of the household supplies available at the program made a huge difference to the families. As one participant wrote, *“Before the program, I didn't have toilet paper because I had to pay bills and food. It was very difficult, we were full of needs. Now, thanks to the program, I have toilet paper, soap for my hands, shampoo, and most important of all, diapers, wipes, and lotion for my baby. Their contributions make a big difference and I am very thankful for the blessings that the program gives us.”*

Many families were able to earn household supplies for their home by using the tickets they have earned to purchase items. This participant wrote, *“ This organization has helped me*

with all my basic necessities and much more. With the tickets I earn at the program, I am able to redeem them for laundry detergent, shampoo, conditioner, and many more useful items. I also have the opportunity to redeem my tickets for baby supplies. This helps me very much because diapers, wipes, and all baby hygiene items can be very costly.” Earning these items lifted a huge burden off the participants’ shoulders. Many participants also noted how their children learned about working hard, independence, and the importance of saving. Many of the participants noted, *“One of the ways my children have changed is that they have learned how to work and earn their tickets so they can go to the store. At the store, my children are able to buy their school supplies and gifts for mother and father’s day. They are happy because they have the means to buy gifts.”*

Roadmap

This project report consists of three sections. The first chapter focuses on introducing the project, a background on the organization, the goals and deliverables that would be presented to the organization, the methodology section, and the analysis and conclusion section. The second chapter is organized as a standalone article for the journal *Anthropology in Action*, which mainly focuses on the findings of the thematic analysis, recounting the experiences of the families who participate in the Succeeding Together program, exploring how they experience living in Silicon Valley, and reviewing relevant literature regarding poverty and the perceptions minority groups have on public assistance programs. I conclude chapter two with a discussion on some of the takeaways from the Succeeding Together project. Chapter three focuses on the results and a discussion regarding the key findings of the project, reviewing the anthropological significance, exploring the limitations of the research, and exploring recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER TWO:

**PROVIDING RELIEF TO FAMILIES IN NEED: AN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF A RENTAL
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM IN SILICON VALLEY**

Abstract

This report reflects my partnership with a San José-based non-profit organization in order to complete a thematic analysis of the essays written by participants in a rent relief program. The key focus of this thematic analysis was to identify the issues and struggles the participants faced. For this project, we were also interested in determining the key outcomes of the program and also identifying the strategies families use to combat the high cost of living in Silicon Valley. I conducted a thematic analysis on the 792 essays written by the diverse families who participated in the program from 2009 to 2018. Below I present the key findings of this analysis.

Keywords: Thematic analysis, Non-profit collaboration, Evaluation

Introduction

It is no secret that Silicon Valley is one of the most expensive places to live in the United States. San José is one of the largest cities on the west coast, considered the epicenter of Silicon Valley, which ranks as one of the leaders of high-tech software and hardware as well as the home to a variety of high-tech companies. Housing prices have been rising in the area putting tremendous pressure on low-wage workers who are struggling to afford the cost of living in the area. In fact, between 2010 to 2015 rental prices shot up 70% in the area (Morrow 2015). According to the Census Bureau, in San José, 7% of the people live at or below the Federal Poverty Level (2022).

The technological development and economic boom of Silicon Valley have left those outside of the tech industry struggling to pay the rent. In fact, due to the price of housing, tenant eviction is a common occurrence in Silicon Valley. Measures have been put in place by the state to combat the rental prices. The rental control ordinance known as the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act restricts rent increase on apartment buildings occupied before 1995 (Cho 2016). Additionally, under the Apartment Rent Ordinance, rent can only be increased by five percent every twelve months in San José (SanJoséca.gov 2022). However, local homeowners' associations and real estate associations have been strongly opposed to any form of rent control (Cho 2016). This partly has to do with the booming economy of the area, which has produced 57,000 new jobs in ten years (Morrow 2015). Many of the landlords have been trying to raise the rental property prices in order to maximize their profits. While much of the growth is in tech-based firms, other low-wage jobs have also grown in numbers, however, wages have not kept pace with the cost of living of San José.

The Census Bureau (2022) reported that in San José the median household income in 2021 was \$125,075. The Census Bureau also reported that the median value of owner-occupied housing units in San José was \$986,700, the median cost of a mortgage was \$3,539, and the median rent in San José is \$2,366 (2022). In Silicon Valley, renters and homeowners have been overpaying for housing and have been paying more than thirty percent of their gross income on housing-related costs (Cho 2016). Similarly, the widening income inequality in the area is feeding the housing crisis as well-paid workers set the tone for the market, driving the prices of housing up (Rein 2015).

The high cost of living puts many of the low-income families under tremendous pressure simply to be able to afford to pay for their basic needs. Much of their income goes towards paying rent. Many of these individuals end up living paycheck to paycheck in one of the most expensive areas of the country. In fact, some of these individuals who are unable to afford housing prices end up looking for cheaper alternatives such as living in substandard and overcrowded housing, living in garages, living in their cars, or end up homeless living on the streets. Many families who are unable to afford the prices of Silicon Valley, seek financial refuge by participating in programs like those offered by local non-profit organizations that aim to provide relief to these low-income families that live in San José. One of these organizations is Succeeding Together.

Succeeding Together

For this project, I partnered with Succeeding Together, one of the many non-profit organizations located in San José that aims to alleviate the impacts of poverty in low-income communities. Succeeding Together is a non-profit organization located in San José that aims to

curtail the effects of poverty within their community. The organization's key mission is to "Provide and promote education, development through mentorship and goal-setting, guidance on financial literacy and healthcare, promote healthy relationships of their members," and by "Empowering its members in order to gain important and transferable skills that can be used in the real-world applications" (Succeeding Together 2022). Succeeding Together offers day-long programs that work on promoting families' self-confidence, promote financial literacy, and educate their members on the importance of nutrition and of healthy practices. Succeeding Together offers classes on parental effectiveness, English literacy, violence prevention, computer education, life classes, the path to college, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education. Succeeding Together collaborates with other local agencies and community leaders in order to inform its members about the diverse services that are available in their community. Families earn tickets by participating in the diverse activities that are available at their program and can use these tickets to purchase household products and other essential goods. This organization's goal is to alleviate some of the financial burdens that families experience by living in Silicon Valley. Families are able to grow, network, and develop various different essential skills they can use outside of the program.

The words of those who need services often powerfully reflect the impact of Succeeding Together programs:

"My daughter was diagnosed with leukemia. I felt like my whole life was falling apart. I received a call from one of the staff members of the program who wanted to discuss why I had not attended the program. This surprised me because I barely knew the staff and had not been involved in this organization too long. However, after talking to the directors of the program they informed me they would help me with anything I needed."

These words, written by the mother of a very ill child who participated in the Succeeding Together program perfectly described the environment and culture promoted by this organization. The level of compassion and attentiveness the Succeeding Together staff demonstrate to its members has shown to be particularly beneficial for those experiencing moments of crisis. This passage, and others like it, illustrates how the staff at Succeeding Together often take a compassionate and selfless approach to support their members. The individuals and children who attend the program are encouraged to be empathetic, help their fellow peers, and make lasting contributions to their community.

In 2018, I was invited to conduct an evaluation of Succeeding Together's rent relief program, an initiative that was developed to help participating families that were struggling to keep up with the rising cost of housing in the region. After discussing different possibilities with the non-profit's directors, we agreed that instead of an evaluation, I should do an assessment based upon qualitative data that the organization had been collecting over the past nine years. This project aimed at gaining further insights into the lives of the families served by Succeeding Together, including their struggles, barriers, and outcomes of the program. This project aimed at complementing previous quantitative research and the goal of this thematic analysis was to provide Succeeding Together with a better understanding on the challenges faced by the program participants and identify the impact of the Succeeding Together services. Succeeding Together could potentially use the results of this research to inform the organization's efforts, be able to present the results to their donors, and potentially better serve their families and improve their programs.

The assessment would be based largely upon a thematic analysis on brief essays written by participants of the rent relief program. I was to analyze 792 essays with the main objective

being to identify the families' experiences with the Succeeding Together program and their experiences of living in Silicon Valley. However, because of the vast amount of data, and since I was the only researcher that would be involved in this project, I conducted a systematic sampling approach, meaning that I only analyzed half of the essays. I do have to mention, because the essays were not anonymized, there is a possibility that the individuals who wrote these essays were not being completely candid. It leaves some doubt on the veracity of their writing and how they truly perceived and experienced services in the Succeeding Together program. Because of this caveat, researchers have to view the results of this project with caution. For future research, I would encourage Succeeding Together to anonymize the essays and have a third party conduct the data collecting process so there will be less doubt about the validity of the qualitative data. The next section will recount the experiences of the individuals who use the Succeeding Together programs. I will explore the key themes that appeared within the essays, how these individuals experience living in Silicon Valley, and what the participants listed as the major outcomes of the Succeeding Together services.

Coping with Economic Challenges

A theme that appeared frequently in the essays had to do with the economic challenges faced by many of the people living in Silicon Valley. Within the essays, 78% mentioned that they struggled to obtain affordable housing or full-time employment. Although these challenges lie outside of Succeeding Together's primary scope, the organization provides a great deal of help for families who are confronting difficult economic circumstances. For example, Succeeding Together's coordinators bring immigration attorneys and educators into their programs to provide information, guide parents in keeping their families safe, help them keep their children thriving educationally and emotionally, and to answer questions about various topics. Succeeding

Together's staff also regularly bring housing attorneys into their programs to consult directly with families dealing with landlords, evictions, rent, and other pressing issues.

These supplementary services are critically important to participants. As one member wrote, *"I felt lost and disoriented and did not know where to go with my questions or problems. Now I know this program will help me find the organizations and resources to solve my problems."* Such statements illustrate the Succeeding Together approach, connecting outside experts with families to inform them about diverse topics such as tenant law, education and child development, job training assistance, and immigration law, which seems to be making a positive impact on participants' lives.

Earning Basic Necessities

Another significant theme that emerged from the essays had to do with how Succeeding Together programs allow families to earn necessities. The vast majority of respondents, 82% highlighted the importance of these programs. By participating in Succeeding Together activities, classes, and events, families can earn tickets that they can use to purchase at the organization's "treasure chest" store in exchange for cleaning supplies, diapers, school supplies, and other essential household goods. Not only do the diverse programs aim at educating, empowering, and promoting the self-development and self-esteem of its members, but families who participate in these programs can also earn household supplies and basic necessities. Many participants noted how the "treasure chest" made life easier: *"Since we buy at the treasure chest store all the things we need for the house, we feel less pressure financially,"* wrote one of the participants.



Figure C. Some household items that families can purchase with their tickets at the “treasure chest” store.

The Succeeding Together banking system is also designed to play a crucial role in helping participants improve their financial literacy. Family members can save their tickets in the Succeeding Together "bank," allowing them to become familiar with common banking procedures like making deposits, withdrawing funds, and earning interest on saved tickets. These processes encourage children and families to learn about budgeting, money management, and financial literacy in a pragmatic way. Surprisingly, some families have never been able to open a bank account or a savings account. In the essays, families shared various reasons why they had not opened a savings or bank account. Many families acknowledged that they lacked financial

literacy or education on the topic, while others expressed concerns about the reliability of the banking institution or confusions regarding banking procedures. Those families that were new to this country were particularly hesitant and did not know what banking institutions were trustworthy. In addition, some families also lacked the funds to open an account.

Many of the essays indicated that Succeeding Together is helping its members practice and educate them on the importance of financial literacy. The organization strives to teach the adults and the children who participate in the program to think about the future, save their tickets, and earn interest on their money. These processes strive to help families be more disciplined and forward-thinking individuals. Over the long term, if the program is successful in instilling these values, both the children and adults may be better prepared and able to become self-sufficient and financially responsible individuals.



Figure D. A child earning “tickets” by participating in one of the Succeeding Together activities in 2018.

Fostering Better Health and Wellness

Many participants reflected favorably upon the ways in which Succeeding Together has helped family members improve their physical, mental, and emotional health. Within the essays, 44% mentioned this as a significant and valuable outcome. The organization's programs include classes in which participants receive nutritional and health awareness information. Members are taught how to create nutritionally balanced meals at the program. This knowledge has allowed individuals to be more conscious consumers and has also motivated them to better their own health, as well as that of their family and friends. Succeeding Together also collaborates with local healthcare workers in order to monitor their participant's blood pressure, weight, and assess their overall health. The program aims to help its members alleviate physical and mental stresses by providing a variety of services such as acupuncture and stress reduction techniques. For example, a respondent wrote: *"I used to have anxiety attacks and I used to suffer a lot. When I came to this program and started acupuncture my problems seemed to go away, my life changed for the better, and (I) stopped taking medicine and my family and I felt safer. My problem has gone, perhaps it never existed in the first place, but the stress of not being able to work and the lack of money was making me anxious."* Many participants noted that they felt strongly supported by the organization, its staff, and other families. Several suggested that such support was lacking in their lives until they began attending Succeeding Together. The organization's classes and programs strive to regularly provide physical, emotional, and psychological support to participating families.

Improving Communication

According to many of the essays, Succeeding Together has drastically impacted the families it serves by helping parents improve their communication skills. The essays showcased how participants are able to better communicate with their partners, children, teachers, government workers, and other influential community members. Among the essays, 42% included this theme. The ability to communicate more clearly helped parents create stronger social bonds with various individuals. Many respondents talked about how they learned to express effectively their emotions and feelings in order to have meaningful dialogues with their families, neighbors, and others. As one individual wrote, "*Our communication skills have improved drastically...it is easier for us to express our feelings and interact with others.*" Similarly, many essays recounted how children attending Succeeding Together learned to communicate with others, were encouraged to pursue higher learning, and learned the importance of sharing, compassion, hard work, financial responsibility, and empathy.



Figure E. One of the Succeeding Together classes where a teacher discusses with the families the importance of time management, setting a visual schedule, and how to better communicate with their children.

One striking example of the long-term effects of the program seemed to be that the participant's literacy skills and communication skills appeared to have improved. The length and clarity of the essays seemed to improve throughout the years. Some participants' writing skills improved significantly over time, and they tended to write longer, more detailed, and more expressive essays after participating in the program for several years. For instance, in 2009 the average word count of respondents' essays was 233 words. In 2018, the average word count of their essays had increased to 444 words. Not only did the writing increase in length, but the clarity and quality of the writing drastically improved. It is important to note, however, that although many individuals were able to practice and refine their literacy skills at the program, one cannot attribute the improvements of their writing solely to Succeeding Together. It is very possible that the longer the individual spent in the United States, the better adapted the

Spanish-speaking individual became to the language, and the more that individual's communication improved over time.

In addition to helping families communicate more effectively, the essays indicate that the organization's classes have given participants the skills and self-confidence to communicate with other key players in their community including teachers, employers, healthcare providers, and other professionals. Some respondents noted that they have become more involved in their children's lives and academic careers due in part because of the encouragement of Succeeding Together. Several long-term members of the program discussed how the organization positively impacted their children's educational paths: many children from those families are either attending or planning to attend college, and a considerable number of them have graduated from universities.

Promoting Long-Term Growth and Education

Lastly, one of the important outcomes of the program many participants listed in their essays had to do with long-term growth, particularly educational achievements. Many respondents wrote about the importance that Succeeding Together classes have had on their individual development and self-confidence. In fact, 49% of the essays highlighted this theme. Among other things, participants discussed how being involved in Succeeding Together programs helped them learn new skills. For example, many people wrote about how beneficial English as a Second Language (ESL) classes have been to their lives. In the words of one participant, *"I enjoy taking classes that will help me learn and improve my English."* Because many participants are immigrants and may not fully grasp the English language, ESL classes

have a tremendous impact on those seeking better educational opportunities, employment, and other social services.

Succeeding Together is also a strong advocate of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education and paving a pathway to college. The program offers a range of services designed to help children develop the skills and knowledge they need to excel academically. Many families have highlighted in their essays how STEM education at the program has provided their children with the foundations needed to be successful academically. According to the families, the workshops at the organization have encouraged the parents to be more involved in their children's education and to play a more active role in all aspects of their children's development. Many families have had children who attended the program go off to college and become the first member of their family in acquiring a degree in higher education.

Takeaways

It is important to note that Succeeding Together and its programs seek to implement a couple of specific strategies that are not always common among non-profit service providers. One approach is to put special emphasis on long-term outcomes that may not be observable until years or even decades later. While many non-profits focus on short-term objectives (for example, helping families deal with crisis situations), Succeeding Together puts special emphasis on what might be called sustainable outcomes or generational outcomes, they aim at providing members with the tools needed to be successful in the long-term through processes of education, socialization, financial education, personal development, and building members' self-esteem. Similarly, their merit-based approach aims to provide its families with a sense of accomplishment and success. Rather than simply handing out items, the program requires

families work for what they want. This approach may help participants develop a strong work ethic and a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

Some critics may argue that the model adopted by Succeeding Together reflects a “culture of poverty” framework, which suggests that people are poor due to their lack of initiative, abilities, or lack of motivation (Lewis 1967; Harvey and Reed 1996). Some of these critics may believe that marginalized individuals may feel helpless and unable to change their situation, engaging in self-defeating dialogue that perpetuates the cycle of poverty through the values, attitudes, and behaviors that are passed down generation to generation (Harvey and Reed 1996). As a result, the children in these communities may absorb such notions and values, leading for poverty perpetuating as individuals feel despair and presume they are unable to escape their poverty-stricken situation (Harvey and Reed 1996). These critics may propose that individuals need to overcome these ideas, beliefs, and attitudes in order to succeed in Silicon Valley. However, individuals in poverty may find these concepts and ideas contradictory to their experiences, since they oversimplify the complexities of poverty and fail to recognize that the issues are more complex than maladaptation of people in poverty (Morris 1989). Today, these concepts and ideas may be a little outdated. In fact, some scholars believe that the concept of “culture of poverty” has been often misunderstood, as the “culture of poverty” was used more as a coping mechanism by marginalized communities as they aimed to deal with the challenges of living in a capitalistic society that often exploited and challenged their upward mobility (Lewis 1967; Hill 2002; Harvey and Reed 1996).

Critics who blame individuals for their poverty fail to see that the issues of poverty go beyond the individual, as there are social, political, structural, and systemic factors that perpetuate poverty. This kind of “victim blaming” fails to recognize the flawed system that

continues to perpetuate poverty within these communities. Succeeding Together has set out to mitigate the effects of poverty by attempting to provide its participants with some of the skills and tools they may need to escape it. By providing its members with these resources, the organization aims to better prepare its participants for the challenges of the real world.

The issues of poverty and housing are issues that far exceed the capabilities that Succeeding Together or any other non-profit can address. However, one strategy the organization attempts to combat poverty is through education. In my analysis, I discovered that many of the parents that attended the program were eager to learn about how they could better prepare their children for a college education. In fact, many of the families wrote that they never thought that a university-level education would be possible for themselves or their children until they learned about the academic and financial resources available through the program. The program encouraged its families to actively participate in their children's education and explore additional resources that could help them pursue higher learning. Ultimately, by investing in its members and the broader community, the program aims to mitigate the effects of poverty by equipping their community with some of the tools that may be needed to excel academically and overcome their situation.

Another component of the research that should be highlighted is how the organization works to impact the development of both the children as well as the adults that participate in their program. The program strives to educate the children and adults to learn skills that can be used outside of the program. Succeeding Together aims to improve the literacy skills of not only the children that participate in their programs but of the adults as well. Examining their writing, it was evident within the essays how the quality, content, and fluidity of the writing drastically improved throughout the years. In addition, families reported improved self-confidence and

self-esteem. After spending time in the program, the parents felt comfortable exploring different resources within their communities. Succeeding Together's model is structured in a way where their members can learn, network, and families can grow all by completing tasks and earning household supplies at the same time. A vast majority of their members are long-term participants who report that they not only have seen positive development within themselves, but the program has also provided their children with the tools necessary to thrive throughout their academic careers. Members have also reported that the program has educated and guided the parents in being more active participants in their children's academic careers, having better communication with their partners, and having an overall stronger bond with their families.

The Succeeding Together program distinguishes itself by prioritizing rapport and trust building with its members in an effort to deconstruct the stigma and misconceptions that some of these individuals may have regarding public assistance programs. Dohan (2003) and Smith (2007) showed through their research that different low-income groups stigmatize and negatively perceive governmental aid and public assistance programs and how they negatively responded to these services. These groups failed to actively participate in community-based interventions. Building rapport with these marginalized communities was difficult partly due to the lack of trust. Succeeding Together attempts to combat those barriers by focusing on a long-term approach. The program aims to enhance its members skills, abilities, confidence, and self-esteem through a range of classes and activities. Participants are given the opportunity to choose which activities they want to take part in during each of the program's sessions, with a variety of options available that focus on different topics and promote diverse skill sets. As members complete various task, they can earn tickets, which they can then redeem for goods at the "treasure chest" store. Additionally, current members who have found value in the program's

services often refer many of the new participants and encourage them to check out what the program has to offer.

Succeeding Together's programs are structured to encourage collaboration between staff and participants, allowing their members' voices to be heard. This organization is interested in identifying the perceptions, struggles, experiences, and issues their members face and aims to provide the resources, workshops, classes, and the education their members need to improve their quality of life. Many participants have noted they felt empowered as they learned new skills and were educated regarding an array of diverse topics at the program's classes. Zlolniski (2006) explains, it is important to empower Latinx women within these low-income communities as they are involved in activism, improving and promoting education, and the well-being of their families and that of their community. These women are often involved in civic engagement projects that focus rather than being victims of poverty, they are active participants engaged in being agents of change, using their social networks, community organizations, and using their spaces to empower their families and their communities fighting the different structures that perpetuate poverty (Zlolniski 2006).

Succeeding Together tries to combat the effects of poverty by providing resources, collaborating with members, aiming to empower their members so they can be people that can change their circumstances, and aim to provide members with the skills and confidence needed so they can use their voices to create change. The program's objectives are to educate, empower, and provide its members with the self-confidence needed so they can become their own advocates. Some long-term participants of Succeeding Together have reported experiencing significant personal growth as a result of their involvement with the program. Some members reported feeling more comfortable communicating with other local leaders in their community,

comfortable pursuing resources externally, and feeling that their needs were being addressed at the program.

The essays suggested that Succeeding Together has enabled some participants to expand their social networks, which can be a helpful strategy for families striving to escape poverty. As Vásquez- León (2009) points out, vulnerable groups despite their limitations, develop strategies that minimize their vulnerability. Succeeding Together aims to provide moral and emotional support for families in need, while also assisting them in forming connections with peers and different organizations of their community. For marginalized individuals, social capital can help counteract the impacts of the structures and institutions that have historically impacted the critically vulnerable (Bourdieu 1986). Families can sometimes mitigate the effects of poverty by manipulating the structure of their social networks, by establishing strong connections with community agencies, and by relying on the networks they have built through the program (Jones and Faas 2017). As members expand their connections, some of these participants may have better access to job opportunities, financial assistance, healthcare, child development resources, tenant rights information, and immigration resources.

Lastly, Succeeding Together aims to provide its members with a safe space for families to learn new skills and meet new people. The organization encourages participants to be open to new experiences, cultures, and ways of thinking and acting. As one of the participants wrote, *"During my time with this organization, this program has helped me express myself to be more open, to learn about different cultures and ways of behaving."* In addition, the program has worked with families by giving them different resources to help their members address the physical, emotional, and mental health of its members. Succeeding Together offers its members a variety of classes and resources that they can use to combat their stressors. The organization has

provided classes for families that discuss the importance of stress reduction and teach stress-reduction strategies. Additionally, many families reported that the program offered acupuncture services. Although some participants were initially apprehensive about this experience, many reported positive experiences with acupuncture and how it helped reduce their levels of stress. These services have been beneficial to some of the participants, as there seemed to be limited resources in the community aimed at addressing their emotional and mental health.

Conclusion

The root causes of poverty and disparity are complex social issues that often greatly transcend the scope of non-profit, public aid, and governmental assistance programs. However, the approach a public assistance program takes should be individualized and personalized at a community level. The way public assistance programs provide aid and the models that they utilize should be flexible. What works for one community may not work for another, and the issues that plague one community might be very different from those of another. Perceptions, ideas, and experiences often vary drastically in different settings. In order to identify the best approaches for a particular community, it is important to identify what the community needs and identify the communities' perceptions, notions, and ideas regarding government aid and public assistance programs. By doing so, programs might be better prepared to combat those notions and provide better-tailored interventions for the communities they are dealing with. The Succeeding Together program provides educational programs and skill-building opportunities for families in need, with a focus on promoting self-confidence and networking opportunities. By helping participants acquire new skills and knowledge, the program seems to have had a positive impact on their lives. Additionally, by prioritizing the personal development of both the children and adults, the program aims to create long-term changes for its participants.

Creating a program that rewards its members based on merit and effort can have some advantages. First, some members may take pride in their achievements and feel a sense of accomplishment. Second, participating in the program and developing new skills can boost members' self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth. Finally, families can earn items they need, which is particularly helpful for those who are struggling financially. Many of the participants who have taken part of the program's classes reported feeling more confident thanks to the skills they developed while at the program. This newfound confidence appears to have enabled some members to feel comfortable communicating with local teachers, healthcare workers, and other organizations as they explore diverse resources and strive to escape poverty.

Escaping poverty is no easy feat and can take generations, especially in an environment like Silicon Valley where moving up the economic ladder, earning a living wage, and breaking the poverty line can seem practically impossible for many. However, this organization is attempting to accelerate the process by promoting and providing education, financial literacy training, helping its members improve their self-esteem, and by helping members become self-reliant. According to Fitts and McClure (2015), in the Latinx community, when an entity is "*de confianza*" this means that the entity is reliable, trustworthy, and respected. Succeeding Together has prioritized building a strong sense of community among its members and local leaders, attempting to become a trusted entity or "*de confianza*." With this in mind, the organization has structured programs that aim to break down barriers of trust and designed services that attempt to destigmatize public assistance for its community.

CHAPTER THREE:

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

In this concluding chapter, I present an overview of the project's outcomes and key findings of the thematic analysis. I follow up with a discussion section that mainly focuses on the takeaways of this project. The last section focuses on a reflection regarding the anthropological significance, a discussion regarding the limitations of the project, and I give recommendations for future research.

Outcomes and Key Findings of the Project

The analysis of the essays revealed several themes and topics that stood out from the rest (refer to Table 2 for details on the most frequently appearing themes and their frequency). In particular, the essays revealed how Succeeding Together has helped participants:

- Prepare family members to attain long-term goals, particularly educational goals
- Acquire the skills needed to better communicate with others
- Earn essential household items by participating in programs that stress financial literacy
- Improve the physical, mental, and emotional health of family members
- Cope with the economic challenges associated with living in Silicon Valley

Table 2 Prominent Themes throughout the Essays from 2009-2019

Code:	Total Number of Times A Theme Appeared within the Essays (Sampled Essays n= 396)
Better parental engagement with children, educators, etc.	166
Reported improvements in physical and/or mental health	176
Direct education of parents through Sunday Friends classes and/or consultations	193
Challenges (paying for housing, obtaining stable and/or full-time employment)	306
Earning basic necessities through Sunday Friends participation	321

One of the main themes appearing in the essays had to do with members reporting that the program has prepared family members to attain long-term goals, particularly educational goals. Many of the classes focused on encouraging parents to play a more active role in their children's academic careers. Additionally, the program also encouraged their members to pursue a degree in higher education. This participant wrote, *“Before I was a little shy and I did not know many things but I have learned a lot in the program. I always talk to my kids about how important it is to go to school but I never thought that they would go to the university. It is*

something I didn't know. I told my children to continue studying not to drop out of school because it is their future but I did not know that there were many ways to go to college. There is a lot of support and financial aid and if you know how and what to look for it is a little easier. At the program, they taught me how to talk to the kids and how to support them. This is the reason I keep attending the classes and the different discussions.” The program provided the families with additional resources for academic and financial assistance, which they could explore. Many families reported having limited education, which resulted in them not knowing much about financial services that could fund their academic endeavors. Furthermore, due to the high cost of living in Silicon Valley, many families felt financially-strained and unable to afford a college education. This member reported, *“It has been very important for me to learn about college education. I have tried to participate more in my daughter’s education. This organization changed my way of thinking. I used to think that because we are a low-income family, college would not be an option. I learned that if all my children work hard and are good students and I am there to support them, they can continue their studies. Now I have two daughters at San José State.”*

An important theme that emerged within the writing had to do with many of the members reporting the program has helped them improve their communication skills. One of the most impactful courses the members highlighted in their essays had to be the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. The ESL classes provided a significant benefit to the families as they were able to learn, practice, and gain a better understanding of the English language in part because of these courses. This grandparent reported, *“The classes that are most valuable to me are the English Classes and the computer station program. In the past three years, my vocabulary has improved. I am excited when I have to do my homework. I am able to*

communicate and understand my grandkids and use these skills at work.” According to this grandparent, these classes have not only helped them communicate more effectively with their family, but given them the ability to apply these skills in their workplace. Additionally, other members reported that these classes helped them express their emotions effectively and enabled them to build healthier relationships with their family members. These courses encouraged members to communicate with their children in a calm and constructive manner instead of resorting to yelling or screaming. This participant wrote, *“Before coming to the program, I didn't have patience with my children and I spoke loudly to them. I feel like we did not understand each other. They were rebellious and I did not know how to speak to them. The classes here taught me how to speak to my children, be a better parent, and how to show my affection. My children's behavior changed, they are more affectionate, talk more with me, their character also changed and they are doing better in school. They are more social and I feel like their self-esteem has improved.”*

Another prominent theme that emerged from the essays was the importance of earning essential household items through financial literacy. Many members earned tickets by participating in the programs and used them to purchase items. The members also noted that the program actively taught and emphasized financial literacy. For example, one individual wrote, *“The classes in the program have taught us how to manage our money because we need to save our tickets in order to purchase items. We save our tickets like we save money.”* Many families in the area face financial stress, as they struggle to make ends meet. However, earning items through the program has a significant impact on these diverse families. One member expressed gratitude for the program's support, *“The program has helped me a lot because I am in a lot of*

debt. I feel very supported and motivated by the program. Personally, the program has helped me a lot because I am able to buy paper towels and soap with the tickets I earn.”

Many of the participants reported the program benefited them by helping them improve their health as well as that of their families. The organization offered opportunities for families to consult with medical professionals during the program, and individuals were able to measure various health metrics, including weight, BMI, sugar blood levels, and their blood pressure. Many participants also learned about the importance of nutrition and how to prepare well-balanced meals. As one member wrote, *“I remind my family regarding calorie content of food so I can modify my diet and I try to exercise more. My family strives to exercise more and our goal is to reach or get close to our ideal weight so we can better our health. This program has helped my family modify and change our eating habits. However, we know that we must develop and cultivate self-control and will power to keep our weight at the healthiest level possible.”* Moreover, the program often offered families mental health support services, mortality and grievance support, and information on various mental health services they could access in their community. This participant wrote, *“I heard the talk on when someone loses a loved one, how to react and the symptoms. This topic really helped me a lot. The meeting helped me a lot as well as the lectures on how to carry the pain or loss of a loved one and it helped me feel better.”*



Figure F. Some of the Succeeding Together members waiting to get their blood pressure and weight checked by a local nurse during one of the programs in 2018.

Finally, in the essays, many of the participants reflected on the challenges of living in the area. Many families expressed difficulties with paying their bills, particularly when it came to housing cost. One member noted, *“The rents in these areas are very high and they go up every year. I have just started to work and I cannot attend the program often but I try to make it whenever I can. Not only do I learn new things, but I also receive a lot of support from this program. I have received rent relief several times and this makes it easier to buy other things for my children.”* Living in Silicon Valley can be challenging for families, and many of the participants in the program shared their experiences of struggling to pay for their basic needs. Complex home-life challenges often impact these individuals financially, making it even more

difficult for these people to financially survive in the area. Many participants highlighted how the program and its services play a crucial role in their lives. This participant explained, *“This program has helped me a lot because I am the breadwinner at home. I am the only one working in the household and I support the mother of my grandchild financially, as I buy him diapers and food and anything else that is needed. I make very little money and have too many expenses at home. My son is disabled and is unable to work. I also have to pay his medical expenses. This program helps me a lot with rent because it is very expensive. I almost do not have enough money to live. This program supports us in many ways. They help us pay for rent and they give us information for other things we need. With the extra money I will be able to buy stuff for my grandchild and food for the household. The staff also provides our family with a bag of groceries that we can take after the program.”*

Discussion

Non-profit organizations that aim to combat the issues of poverty and housing often face significant challenges that far exceed their capabilities. This is particularly true in Silicon Valley, where income inequality is extremely pronounced, with the top 10% of households owning 66% of the collective wealth of the area (Silicon Valley Index 2023). In fact, many participants of the rent relief reported struggling to afford their basic needs. According to Silicon Valley Index (2023), it estimates that 220,000 households in Silicon Valley have less than \$5,000 in total assets, with an estimated 22,000 unbanked households having little to no assets. Additionally, Dohan (2003) and Smith (2007) conducted research that demonstrated how different marginalized communities’ distrust and stigmatize public assistance programs, which makes it even more challenging for non-profit organizations to provide relief to these communities. Barab et al. (2004) suggests that in order to have better interventions, it is important to listen to diverse

stakeholders, establish trust and respect with your community, and be flexible and readapt your approach if needed, in order to combat the complex social issues that the community faces.

Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010) suggest that conducting long-term studies of different cultural groups in various environments can provide valuable insight into their ideas, perceptions, experiences, and can potentially inform organizations regarding how marginalized communities view public assistance programs. Each community is unique and requires a specialized and nuanced approach to address their specific needs. Identifying the needs of a community, and allowing its members to play a crucial role in shaping and curating services is essential. Additionally, recognizing members of the community as agents of change rather than targets, can also help create better-tailored services specific to that community (Faas and Marcelo 2021). By actively listening to the narratives of the community, researchers can gain a better understanding on their experiences, needs, and can help program designers craft better and more effective services to meet those needs. By involving community members in the design and delivery of service, organizations can strengthen their connection to the community and empower its members to become advocates of change.

Zlolski's (2006) research indicates that low-income communities tend to prefer participating in local non-profit organizations over government-sponsored projects due to their grassroots approaches. Succeeding Together appears to have designed an approach that aims to serve its community by focusing on long-term educational outcomes and putting special emphasis on the personal and professional development of its members, rather than engaging in short-term crisis intervention. Members reported that the program provides an environment where they can learn new skills and these skills can be used beyond the program. The program places special emphasis on building trust and rapport with its members, by actively listening to

their needs and designing services accordingly. In addition, Succeeding Together aims to connect families with external resources, in an effort to provide their members resources that can cater to their needs beyond the program.

The program evaluation conducted by Dr. Carol Ann Gittens (2017) and her research team from Santa Clara University mainly reported that Succeeding Together creates a strong sense of community among its participants, helps their members achieve academic success, helps reduce their level of stress, promotes financial literacy among its participants, and promotes the health and wellbeing among its families. While my thematic analysis may seem to support Dr. Gittens findings, it is important to view the results of this thematic analysis with caution. One major limitation of this project that cannot be ignored is that the essays were not anonymized, which might have influenced participants in not being completely honest regarding their experiences with the program and its services. Since many of the families reported financial hardships, it is possible the participants of the rent relief program may have been hesitant to critique the program for fear of not receiving the financial assistance they needed. For future analysis, I would encourage the program to anonymize the essays to ensure participants feel free to share their honest experiences with the program, any critiques they might have regarding the services, which may produce more insightful findings for the organization and help them improve their services.

Through my thematic analysis, participants highlighted how they have seen improvements in their overall well-being, personal development, financial literacy, communication skills, and feeling better prepared to pursue higher education. The program's merit-based approach seems to encourage families to actively participate and earn rewards based on their efforts and participation. Participants were able to earn essential goods and household

supplies by engaging in the program. In addition, by completing workshops and classes, it appeared to have boosted participants' self-confidence and self-esteem, while also providing them with valuable skills that could extend outside the program. Overall, these results suggest that the Succeeding Together's model has been beneficial to some of its members and many families seem to appreciate the services the program offers.

This project provided me with valuable insights into the experiences of marginalized individuals who live in Silicon Valley. Through this research, I had the opportunity to share the stories and experiences of families who face poverty on a daily basis, with those who may not fully understand their realities. The long-term relationships and trust that some participants have formed with the organization allowed them to speak freely and openly about their personal struggles, including issues regarding domestic violence, healthcare issues with their families, mental health issues, and regarding issues of child abuse. These complex issues demonstrate some of the significant challenges that marginalized individuals and families in Silicon Valley face on a regular basis.

The main objective of this project was to present the results of a thematic analysis and examine the approach taken by the Succeeding Together program as they attempt to combat the effects of poverty. Despite the program's efforts, many members continue to struggle to make a living wage and afford the basic necessities in Silicon Valley. Myers-Lipton and Armaline (2022) report that 46% of children in Silicon Valley live in households that cannot cover their basic needs. The basic needs that these families are unable to cover include childcare, being able to access health and dental care, diapers, baby formula, and personal hygiene products (Silicon Valley Index 2022). In fact, many of the participants of the relief program continue to rely and depend on the resources provided by Succeeding Together. As income inequality and the cost of

living continues to rise in the area, it seems as if public assistance programs and non-profit organizations seem to be facing an uphill battle difficult to overcome without legislative and government intervention. In fact, Silicon Valley Index (2023) indicates a 5% increase in income inequality since 2021. Moreover, local government has provided few solutions for those experiencing poverty in San José, despite setting a goal in 2017 to build 10,000 affordable units by the end of 2022, with only 1,628 units completed as of 2022 (Myers-Lipton and Armaline 2022). Nevertheless, these findings could be helpful to Succeeding Together or any other organization seeking to alleviate poverty as it helps them better understand these communities. Beyond that, the hope is this research may shed light on the experiences of these individuals and inspire local and state governments to create more aggressive and effective measures to combat poverty.

Anthropological Significance

Using anthropological methods like participant-observation and a bottoms-up approach can provide the researcher with an emic (insider's) perspective into the lives of their participants. An anthropological perspective can lead to a better-nuanced understanding of the everyday realities of the people who they are collaborating with. Anthropological approaches can also help foster new conversations, topics, research strategies, and lines of inquiry. Although I was not able to conduct formal participant-observation due to time constraints and because of the vast amount of data that needed to be analyzed, a thematic analysis was used instead to identify key themes and ideas within the qualitative data. The use of thematic analysis was an important method for this project allowing me to analyze the extensive written material that Succeeding Together had been accumulating over the last nine years. This method allowed me to make connections based on what members were saying in their writing. Often, people cycle through

important ideas and repeat words or phrases that may indicate a significant topic to them (Bernard and Ryan 2003). Because the Succeeding Together program had established a good relationship with many participants, many individuals seemed to write very personal information that would have been very difficult to obtain any other way. This information was very insightful in understanding the individuals' lives and why they may think and behave a certain way.

Qualitative and ethnographic research can inform different organizations and influence policy because it can account for contextual factors in-depth in a way that quantitative data cannot. The project with Succeeding Together aimed to amplify the voices of those underrepresented groups living in Silicon Valley who may not always have the opportunity to share their stories. Marginalized communities are often unable to voice the issues that affect their community and share their experiences, struggles, and hardships. This bottom-up approach aimed to identify the issues and problems the community faces and craft services at the program to meet their needs. For this project, the information gathered comes directly from the narratives of the people who participated in the rent relief program. However, it is essential to recognize that the narratives may have been influenced by the fact that the individuals were affiliated with the organization providing services. The findings of this project will hopefully encourage other entities to engage with their local community in order to determine what issues plague their community and determine the best approaches to address those issues.

My anthropological lens allowed me to adopt a holistic perspective and consider all factors that affect individuals living in poverty. This approach allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the daily struggles faced by marginalized communities, as well as take into account, the social and systemic factors that impact their lives, thoughts, and behaviors. This

allowed me to better understand why some of these individuals may be hesitant about seeking help from public assistance programs.

Ultimately, this project allowed me to provide Succeeding Together a report they could use to better understand their participants and help them construct services to meet their needs. This project can also contribute important insights that can be used by other organizations that work with similar poverty-stricken populations. In particular, we learned how important the concept of trust is for these individuals and some of the resources that these members seem to need such as financial literacy training and college preparation information, just to name a few. Succeeding Together was able to build and sustain the trust of their members by addressing their members' needs and by attempting to provide long-term benefits to its participants. Many families attempted to mitigate the effects of poverty by providing their children with the tools and foundations needed to be successful academically and have better opportunities through education. As we might have also learned from this project, establishing trust with the low-income community is crucial when attempting to make a long-term impact. Additionally, this report showcased the commitment, dedication, and eagerness of these individuals as they attempt to improve their situation and escape poverty. When a program believes in its participants and breaks down barriers, it can positively impact its community.

This project will hopefully give other organizations ideas on different strategies they can utilize when attempting to combat complex social issues in their community. More specifically, this research aimed at providing further information on issues of poverty, housing, and to some extent, mental health issues that marginalized communities deal with. The goal of an applied anthropologist is to solve real-world problems by collecting data to produce systemic changes (Kozaitis 2000; Jones 1976). My project aimed to expand our understanding of what it means to

be in poverty in Silicon Valley, better understand the people in these situations, and help to construct interventions for these individuals.

Limitations of Research

The data for this project was collected by the Succeeding Together staff, which raises the possibility that valuable information could have been lost during this process. For example, this includes key observations, behaviors, connotations, and expressions that could have enriched the research and provided further insights regarding the participants' experiences with the program and its services. Additionally, since the Succeeding Together staff translated the original copies of the essays, important information could have been lost in translation. Participants were required to put their names on the essays for the rent relief program to enable Succeeding Together to identify the members who participated. Since the essays were not anonymized, this might have impacted the responses given for the rent relief. The participants may have felt the inclination to paint the program in a positive light since these vulnerable members would receive financial assistance after writing the essays about their experiences with the program. The qualitative data might have been more insightful if the participants were able to remain anonymous when writing the essays for the rent relief.

Due to the vast amount of data and time constraints, I was unable to complete a traditional participant-observation for this project. Since I was the only researcher that would analyze the data and needed to complete the project in such a short turnaround time, it would have been difficult to complete participant-observation. In addition, because the program only operates on Sundays, the opportunities to complete participant-observation would be limited, since participant-observation requires building rapport with individuals and immersing oneself in

the experience. This would have been challenging given the time constraints and limited access to the program and its participants.

Recommendations for Future Studies

It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study on the psychological and emotional impacts of the Succeeding Together program on the families who have received aid for five to ten years. The program emphasizes personal development, long-term growth, skill-building, and its merit-based approach raises questions about its potential to elicit more positive feelings compared to models that rely on charity or short-term interventions. Future research should also focus on analyzing the experiences and effectiveness of merit-based approaches and similar programs that prioritize long-term growth. Since the majority of Succeeding Together participants are Latinx, it would be interesting to explore if similar programs could have positive outcomes for other minority groups. Additionally, for future analysis on the rent relief, I would encourage Succeeding Together to anonymize the essays to allow participants to be honest regarding their experiences with the services and the effectiveness of the program. Doing so could potentially allow participants to evaluate the program freely, its effectiveness, and potentially provide the program with more information regarding areas of improvement. Similarly, I would encourage the program to collect demographic information in order to have some information regarding the participants of the rent relief. Lastly, future research projects should consider an in-depth ethnographic analysis to provide a deeper anthropological perspective on the organization and its services. Such research could provide valuable insights for program developers and policy makers working with marginalized communities.

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² I have chosen to use a fictitious name for the organization that is the subject of this project report. Therefore, I am not including URL addresses for Succeeding Together references.

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Appendix A: Code Book

Codes
A.Health Challenges and Improved Health Habits
1.Physical health challenges
2.Mental and/or emotional health challenges
3.Better nutritional habits and/or food knowledge
4.Better health education and/or awareness
5.Promotion of healthy living (informing others)
6.Reported improvements in physical and/or mental health
B.Financial Struggles and Successes
10.Financial literacy
11.Basic budgeting skills/management of personal finances
12.Overall financial stability
13.Earning basic necessities through Sunday Friends participation
14. Impact of remittances sent abroad
15.Investment and/or long-term financial planning
16.Challenges (paying for housing, obtaining stable and/or full-time employment)
C.Parenthood, Childhood, and Family Life
20.Better parental engagement with children, educators, better communication, etc.
21.Parenting support through after-school and/or day care programs
22.Effective socialization of children
23.Overall family unity
24.Fostering of critical aspects of children's development
25.Successful parental role-modeling for children
26.Parental support and encouragement of children's higher education
27.Non-nuclear family arrangements (single parenting, multi-generational parenting)
D.Education and Self-improvement
30.Support for children's completion of high school
31.Planning for children's higher education
32.Direct education of parents through Sunday Friends classes and /or consultations
33.Support for pathways to college
34.Self-improvement in terms of self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment

E.Support Networks
40.Sunday Friends staff support of families
41.Community support (from other organizations)
42.Support from other Sunday Friends families (friendships and support networks)
43.Reciprocating and/or giving back to the community over time
F.Emotional Development of Parents and Children
50.Development of trust
51.Development of independence and/or self-motivation
52.Development of initiative and/or self-motivation
53.Development of generosity and/or spirit of giving
54.Development of productivity and/or strong work ethic
55.Development of a positive sense of identity
56.Development of integrity and/or honesty
57.Overcoming depression, anxiety/timidity
58.Leaving behind abusive relationships

Appendix B. Tabulated Data

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Totals
A. Health Challenges and Improved Health Habits											
1. Physical health challenges	0	2	4	3	8	9	23	11	15	10	85
2. Mental and/or emotional health challenges	3	1	0	3	6	13	28	11	17	16	98
3. Better nutritional habits and/or food knowledge	1	7	2	8	18	17	28	30	26	7	144
4. Better health education and/or awareness	0	7	4	5	20	13	24	23	33	9	138
5. Promotion of healthy living (informing others)	0	0	1	0	7	1	10	2	6	1	28
6. Reported improvements in physical/mental health	2	4	7	3	13	23	36	33	33	22	176
B. Financial Struggles and Successes											
10. Financial literacy	9	4	4	9	8	13	11	18	6	7	89
11. Basic budgeting skills/management of personal finances	4	5	6	10	2	9	14	7	10	1	68
12. Overall financial stability	3	5	2	4	5	20	11	26	8	8	92
13. Earning basic necessities through Sunday Friends	7	14	23	31	28	62	57	57	20	22	321
14. Impact of remittances sent abroad	3	0	1	0	2	4	4	1	0	3	18

15. Investment and/or long-term financial planning	3	5	7	8	13	9	12	6	4	1	68
16. Challenges (housing, stable/full-time employment)	18	10	27	21	31	22	85	37	31	24	306
C. Parenthood, Childhood and Family Life											
20. Better parental engagement with children, educators, etc.	0	1	4	3	6	13	28	47	51	13	166
21. Parenting support through after-school/day care programs	0	1	0	1	0	3	5	3	4	3	20
22. Effective socialization of children	5	6	3	2	7	9	20	27	12	16	107
23. Overall family unity	1	7	8	1	6	5	21	24	25	4	102
24. Fostering of critical aspects of children's development	0	2	16	3	1	8	25	13	19	9	96
25. Successful parental role-modeling for children	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	4	2	0	11
26. Parental support and encouragement of higher education	1	7	6	6	1	15	17	17	18	14	102
27. Non-nuclear family arrangements (single, multigenerational)	3	0	3	4	2	6	17	10	3	2	50
D. Education and Self-Improvement											
30. Support for children's completion of high school	0	0	2	1	0	0	4	5	8	0	20
31. Planning for children's higher education	0	0	2	1	0	1	6	3	10	0	23
32. Education of parents in Sunday Friends classes or programs	5	5	6	7	17	27	26	43	43	14	193
33. Support for pathways to college	1	3	1	3	0	0	8	7	18	7	48
34. Self-improvement (self-esteem, confidence, empowerment)	2	6	10	6	1	22	15	11	26	22	121
E. Support Networks											
40. Sunday Friends staff support of families	7	6	9	8	10	14	27	10	7	16	114
41. Community support (from other organizations)	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	5
42. Support from Sunday Friends families (friends, networks)	9	10	9	15	10	17	21	19	18	16	144
43. Reciprocating/giving back to the community over time	0	4	3	7	4	6	16	7	7	4	58
F. Emotional Development of Parents and Children											
50. Development of trust	0	0	0	0	3	3	11	3	9	2	31
51. Development of independence and/or autonomy	1	4	4	3	10	9	16	19	10	13	89
52. Development of initiative and/or self-motivation	1	4	3	4	9	14	16	25	11	13	100
53. Development of generosity and/or spirit of giving	1	7	1	8	3	8	15	8	8	6	65
54. Development of productivity and/or strong work ethic	2	2	3	2	3	6	10	9	13	10	60
55. Development of a positive sense of identity	2	2	3	2	3	6	10	9	13	19	60
56. Development of integrity and/or honesty	2	4	8	1	3	5	6	5	2	1	37
57. Overcoming depression, anxiety/timidity	0	0	2	2	3	6	12	9	8	5	47
58. Leaving behind abusive relationships	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	4

Note: This appendix displays the thematic codes where the vertical axis has the category and the particular code pertaining to that category, and the horizontal axis has the years. Every cell includes the number of times that code appeared for that given year and to the far right the total number that code appeared in the essays from 2009-2018. In some instances, the frequency with which a category appeared in the essays exceeded the total number of essays

that year. The reason for this is that some essays included a single theme several times in the same document. See code B16 for example (titled "Challenges") in 2012 and 2013.