

10-1-2012

# Food Insecurity in Bloomington-Normal: How a Grocery Cooperative Might Help Meet the Needs of Low-Income Residents

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# Food Insecurity in Bloomington-Normal: How a Grocery Cooperative Might Help Meet the Needs of Low-Income Residents



Photo Courtesy of: Green Top Grocery

Prepared by:



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This study was made possible by the generous support of the Pohlmann Family Development Grant.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to the key stakeholders and the focus group participants who shared their insights and perspectives. Many thanks to Western Avenue Community Center and Unity Community Center for allowing us to hold focus groups on their premises and for their assistance along the way. We would also like to thank Green Top Grocery for providing a starting point for this research and guiding questions. Additionally, we would also like to acknowledge the generous support of Dr. Vernon Pohlmann through the Pohlmann Family Development Grant. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Joan Brehm for her guidance and encouragement throughout this project, the Stevenson Center for the resources and support, as well as Dr. Maura Toro-Morn for translating the focus group consent form into Spanish, which was much appreciated.



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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this report is to understand the current food needs of marginalized community-members in the Bloomington-Normal area, to learn how Green Top Grocery may help improve food security among these residents, and to ascertain viable mechanisms to encourage involvement in the cooperative among a diversity of local residents. The findings are based on data from three focus groups and nine key-informant interviews conducted in the Bloomington-Normal community. Key findings most relevant to Green Top's goal of encouraging a diverse membership include the following: Green Top may wish to use existing networks to build trust in the Bloomington-Normal community, keeping in mind they will need to communicate in multiple languages; Green Top could educate the public about *what* a grocery cooperative is; Green Top could consider the needs of marginalized community members when making infrastructure decisions such as where to locate their store. A number of other findings are discussed. In conclusion, additional research is highly recommended for Green Top to move forward with their goals.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University in partnership with the Green Top Grocery Cooperative conducted a research project in Fall 2012 to determine the needs and desires of low-income residents regarding food security and the food systems of their communities. Green Top is a grocery cooperative that remains in its planning stages. For the purposes of our research we employed Green Top's definition of a grocery cooperative as an independent, democratic organization that is owned, operated, and financed by its owners. While the cooperative is owned and operated by those who purchase owner shares, anyone will be able to shop at the store. As a co-owner, people are provided the opportunity to make decisions about current products, future development, and community programs. Grocery cooperatives differ from other commercial grocery stores in that they have values which are determined collectively by their owners. Some common features include: social responsibility, support for local farmers, care for the community, promote food justice and accessibility to healthy food, and many more.

To guide this research, we aimed to understand the current food needs and desires of low-income households within the Bloomington-Normal community. Perceptions, responses, and recommendations of a possible grocery cooperative were also included in the study with the purpose of informing Green Top. The findings of this project will enable Green Top to better target the interests of this population, and will inform the key stakeholders in Bloomington-Normal of issues to address in attaining a more food-secure community. Through key informant interviews with local stakeholders, we obtained valuable knowledge that aided in shaping the design of community focus group meetings. Conducting focus groups facilitated an in-depth analysis of not only what residents' food needs were but also provided valuable feedback for how a new grocery cooperative might meet those needs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to provide a theoretical framework for our research, an examination of relevant research regarding food systems along with food insecurity was conducted. Previous research provides a valuable insight into some of the key themes concerning food insecurity. The following section addresses various themes including the factors that lead to food insecurity, the importance of a healthy diet, programs that provide food assistance, and potential policy changes that could be made to increase security within the food system.

### ***Food Insecurity***

Several overarching themes stand out as vital to approaching the topic of food systems. From these readings, there arises a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and access to healthy, fresh, whole foods. The lower a person's socioeconomic status, the less access that person might have to foods that are more nutritionally rich, healthy, locally-grown, or organic in nature, and that individual might exhibit higher levels of food insecurity. Morton et al. (2005) argue that food insecurity "occurs when there is limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain availability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways," (p.102). The authors also mention that age, income, and education can all be strong predictors of food insecurity. Fox (2008) argues that food insecurity "plagued 36.2 million people in American households" in 2007 alone, including 23.8 million adults, and some 12.4 million children (p.2). Acceptable foods may not be available due to distances that must be traveled to acquire them, particularly for senior citizens and those who experience mobility issues.

Food insecurity is closely related to poverty. In a Canadian study published in 2008, many of the respondents who participated in semi-structured interviews used similar descriptors



when expressing their needs specific to food security. Participants consistently mentioned better quality food such as more fresh produce, as well as issues regarding attaining a balanced diet (Hamelin et al. 2008). Within Canada, various food programs have been instituted in an attempt to address some of the issues related to food access, poverty, and food insecurity. However, despite the increase of such programs since the 1990s, household food insecurity does not seem to be on the decline. In fact, “household food insecurity persists because food programmes [sic] and similar initiatives do not address its root cause, financial insecurity, and are not sufficient in themselves to build sustainable food security for all” (Hamelin et al. 2008:58).

It is important that all people have access to healthy food because lower socioeconomic groups “experience higher mortality and morbidity rates from cardiovascular disease and some cancers than their more advantaged counterparts,” which is due in large part to the nutritionally inadequate foods these groups consume, which do not meet recommended dietary guidelines (Giskes et al. 2007:41). It is reasonable to hypothesize, then, that an increase in access to affordable food with higher nutritional quality might be correlated to a decrease in some of these diet-related health problems, particularly among individuals who currently face limited access to such foods or limited financial means.

### ***Fair Food Systems***

Fair food systems are those that link to healthy, safe foods and represent another theme in relation to this topic. More and more consumers are purchasing locally-grown produce. One statistic states that “organic food and beverage sales have grown from USD 1 billion in 1990 to over USD 21 billion in 2008,” (Briggeman and Lusk 2011:2). Fairness and support for small, predominantly local farming is a key principle of organic agriculture. In another study, researchers discovered that if people believe that their purchases support small family farms,

they are more willing to pay for organic foods. The study indicated, however, that before paying a premium to support these small farms, consumers are primarily concerned with meeting their own needs (Briggeman and Lusk 2011).

Food justice movements have arisen to address some of these issues, including the construction of policy in relation to food, food security, and even providing grounding for “citizen planning in civil society, new forms of governmentality based on partnership between state and NGO sectors,” and other awareness projects (Wekerle 2004:385). Community food security is at the forefront of many of these movements, and is defined as “the ability of a community to ensure that all its members have adequate access to healthful and acceptable food through environmentally sustainable, economically viable, and socially desirable production, processing, and distribution systems,” (Pelletier et al. 1999:401).

Food deserts exemplify the link between poverty and food access. A food desert is a location where neither retail grocery stores nor consumer food stores exist (Morton et al. 2005). In a food desert, the community is limited to a few convenience stores, gas stations, and restaurants, places that often sell more expensive food, lack variety and quality of fresh food. Low-income households are most affected and often consist of the elderly, disabled, and working poor, a population that also frequently faces unreliable transportation.

Another key issue in the topic of fair food systems is the access that individuals might have to locally grown produce. “Consumers care not just about the physical properties of the food they eat, but are also concerned with how the food is produced and delivered to the market” (Briggeman and Lusk 2010:1). This provides evidence that citizens are becoming more and more aware of the perceived benefits that can be garnered from local and organically-grown produce. There is a growing interest and demand for locally-produced products and those that are

considered fair trade. A higher demand for organic products will result in an increase in organic business, which can be considered positive and beneficial.

One study used indicators to identify various aspects of community food security, including demographics, poverty, income, participation in public or private food assistance programs, proximity of individuals to the offices of these types of food assistance organizations, expenditure on food programs, retail food outlets in the area, transportation, and others. Measuring community food security is important because it “allows for identification of food security problems at the community and regional levels rather than at the individual household level,” and thus can seek solutions that address more people in the form of policies, projects, and sustainable food systems (Lopez et al. 2008:52).

### ***Healthy Diet, Healthy Life***

While poor diet and poor health are linked, as evidenced by the rise in both obesity and diet-related diseases in the United States, the opposite also seems to be true. “A number of studies have found that neighborhood residents with better access to supermarkets, particularly for their large offering of variety and food value relative to convenience stores, tend to have healthier diets,” (Wegener and Hanning 2010:160). Unfortunately, for certain individuals living in areas where healthy food options are scarce, the hindrances to both food access and healthy foods may be too great for some households to overcome. Longer distances may be required to travel to these outlets, and the hours of operation for outlets such as farmers' markets or farm stands may be limited (Wegener and Hanning 2010). This suggests that even if individuals were motivated to make better choices regarding their food and nutrition, extenuating circumstances might prevent them from doing so, and as a result, their health is being put at risk by the availability of poorer-quality food with less nutritional value.

Rowe (2010) highlights that the public health impact of obesity exceeds smoking and heavy alcohol usage in the United States. Vulnerable populations are at a higher risk, and 48% of African American women between the ages of 25 and 49 are overweight, as compared to nearly half that number, 26% of European American women (Rowe 2010). Some of the factors that lead to these health problems are related to food, such as a higher caloric intake, or living in a food desert where healthy options are not readily available. Other factors, however, are not necessarily related to food, such as lacking convenient opportunities for exercise, sedentary lifestyles, the acceptability of larger body types in African American culture, earlier menarche, and an earlier average age of first childbirth (Rowe 2010).

### ***Food Assistance***

Food assistance programs exist in an effort to address some of these food insecurity issues. However, “while the increased awareness and usage of nutrition assistance programs makes the ability to acquire foods easier for some, acquisition of wholesome and beneficial fresh foods is extremely difficult, if not impossible for many low income families,” (Fox 2008:7). Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a program that provides food stamps to households in need, and is the highest funded nutritional assistance program in the nation, serving 1 out of 11 Americans monthly (Fox 2008:3). Other such programs that seek to address these issues include Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) services, national school lunch programs, school breakfast programs, summer food service programs. Yet despite the existence of these programs, problems with food security still exist on a nationwide level.

In conjunction with programs that already exist, detailed calls to action address the issue of making healthier foods more available to those who need them most. McCullum et al. (2005) specifically reference three stages in this process. Stage one involves an initial change in food

systems, such as identifying price inequalities in low-income neighborhoods and educating consumers about the benefits of eating seasonal, locally-grown, or organic food. The second stage involves connecting local urban agriculture projects with emergency food programs, and facilitating partnerships that can participate in policy-making activities. Stage three involves redesigning food systems for sustainability, including advocating for better food labeling standards, an increase in the minimum wage and more affordable housing, and institutionalizing market promotion, tax incentives to attract food suppliers, and land use policies (McCullum et al. 2005).

Further calls to action identify the need for planners to help in addressing food availability-related issues. “Planning practitioners and academics can engage in many bridging activities that further food systems planning and contribute to an evolving common discourse, building the common table at which stakeholders will sit” (Campbell 2004:353). Stakeholders, according to Campbell (2004), fall into one of two groups. First, those who take part in the industrialized food system and second, those who are members of an alternative food system. In order to appeal to stakeholders, planners should collect and analyze data, revise local regulations to better promote projects such as community gardens, develop food policy councils locally, and engage in education, such as offering opportunities for service-learning regarding community food systems and public service in local projects (Campbell 2004).

### ***Grocery Cooperatives***

A grocery cooperative is an independent, democratic organization that is voluntarily owned and controlled by those who purchase equity shares in the cooperative. Grocery cooperatives differ from other commercial grocery stores in that they have values which are determined collectively by their owners. Values include building community and strengthening

local economy, supporting local farmers, promoting food justice and accessibility to healthy food, and educating the community about healthy eating. Grocery cooperatives have developed in response to demand for socially responsible products that promote food justice and sustainability and give back to the community. Grocery cooperatives provide a unique opportunity to answer food insecurity by helping community members access healthy, local, and organic foods.

In a recent case study in which a cooperative wished to expand, several challenges arose when deciding upon a potential next step. Some of these included buying a farm, increasing off-site kitchen production, remodeling, opening a restaurant, partnering with non-profit organizations, or opening another store (Berner 2011). It is important to keep these challenges in mind, because the benefits of a food cooperative are plentiful, and expansion of such a market could reach more consumers, particularly those in need.

In order to inspire change, steps must be taken at every level. Individuals must educate themselves about healthy food choices and essentially try to the best of their ability to eat well, even though that is often not the case. Education is vitally important because people might not know how to prepare healthy meals, or they may continue eating nutrient poor foods out of habit or family tradition (Fox 2008). While individuals are taking steps, communities must concurrently take steps to improve the availability and quality of food that its citizens are consuming. Creating policies that allow for community gardens or re-addressing zoning laws to encourage businesses to move into areas, particularly food deserts where access to healthy foods is most severely restricted, are vital to move toward positive change. No matter how well detailed these plans may be, it takes a great deal of motivation from every angle (individuals,

households, neighborhoods, communities, towns, and so on) to truly engage in this type of civic activity and address a need of which people may be unaware.

Low-income individuals living in poor neighborhoods without access to grocery stores might not have the financial means to acquire food, but are likely lacking in time, energy, and resources to engage in healthier eating habits. Unless change at this level is seen as necessary and unless people have self-identified the need for higher quality, more nutritionally dense, healthy foods, it will be difficult for such change to occur.

### ***Policy Changes***

In an examination of wages and working conditions in 2012, the Food Chain Worker's Alliance, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, the Data Center, and Saru Jayaraman (2012), director of the Food Labor Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley, offer policy insight for the industry going forward. They offer several recommendations regarding the future of stakeholders in the food system, which, as of 2010, employed over 15% of workers in the U.S. Improving the food system must involve improving job quality and enabling more mobility in the industry. Employers must also be held accountable to provide good wages and working conditions (Jayaraman 2012).

Policy makers can take the following steps to facilitate these better conditions: raising the minimum wage (especially for tipped workers), creating measures to reduce segregation and discrimination, facilitating better food safety and improved health benefits to workers, decreasing wage theft through legislation with higher penalties to employers in violation, and improving standards in food procurement policies, among others (Jayaraman 2012). Additionally, consumers can raise awareness and support those employers who represent the

good actors in the system. Finally, employers must communicate clearly all policies and procedures and follow through on equal opportunity (Jayaraman 2012).

### ***Conclusions***

There are many challenges that low-income residents face in their access to healthy food. Poverty or belonging to a low socioeconomic status group affects millions of Americans who cannot afford quality food. Financial constraints and lack of access can lead to food insecurity, which is a very pervasive type of stressor. This can affect many aspects of life in society that are unrelated to food. Communities or households whose primary concern is food may not be able to prioritize other aspects of social life or civic engagement. Without active citizens, participation, and ongoing development and value of culture, a society cannot grow beyond its most basic limitations of survival. Insecurity with food is a major hindrance and limitation to a healthy society. Grocery cooperatives attempt to address this by strengthening communities and promoting justice within the food system.

### **CONCEPTUAL DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

The review of relevant literature left the researchers with several key concepts that were used to guide the goals of the research process, including food security, empowerment, community resources, and alternative food systems. The research process is informed by a food justice framework, which addresses history, context, meaning, power, and possibility within the Bloomington-Normal food system. This research aims to assess the current food and nutritional needs and desires of low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, develop recommendations for Green Top Grocery to improve the food security situation in the Bloomington-Normal community, and develop recommendations for the most viable



mechanisms to increase potential involvement in Green Top Grocery among low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal.

Why undertake a community food needs assessment in conjunction with Green Top Grocery, a developing grocery cooperative? Green Top Grocery aspires to address perceived needs and challenges related to food security, access, and justice in the Bloomington-Normal community. Examples of this include supporting local farms, supporting the local economy, putting a focus on human and environmental health, promoting sustainability, creating local jobs, and encouraging participation in community programs. However, before addressing these perceived needs and challenges, it is beneficial for Green Top Grocery to examine whether or not these perceptions are indeed realities. Although Green Top Grocery perceives aspects of the local food system that could be improved through the establishment of a grocery cooperative, it is important to observe more directly where there is room for change in relation to issues of food security. On what level can that change be realized? Does the community itself desire change? Furthermore, can those aspects that need change be effectively addressed by a grocery cooperative?

This research is exploratory in nature. In a broad sense, this research seeks to address both perceived and real problems, how those problems would be best addressed by the grocery cooperative, and other aspects of this community's food situation that are relevant to the development of the cooperative.

What follows is a conceptual map of this research process, beginning with the research questions that provided structure, continuing with an explanation of fundamental concepts contained in those questions, and ending with the rationale behind recruiting the participants who informed this study's findings.

### ***Guiding Research Questions***

The research questions that guided this study were informed by concepts presented in relevant literature on food security, food access, community food needs, and the role that community organizations, such as food banks and grocery cooperatives, can play in addressing those needs. This study addresses three questions related to these concepts:

1. What are the current food and nutritional needs and desires of low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois?
2. How can Green Top Grocery improve the food security situation for low-income residents of Bloomington-Normal?
3. What are the most viable mechanisms to increase potential involvement in Green Top Grocery among low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal?

### ***Conceptualization of Key Concepts***

#### *Food and nutritional needs*

In this research, food and nutritional needs are conceptualized in several ways, including the quantity, quality, and variety of food needed and/or desired by low-income households. The food and nutritional needs are operationalized in terms of challenges that households face in accessing quantity, quality, and variety of foods in the places in which they acquire food.

#### *Low-income residents*

This research project does not necessitate the definition of “low-income residents” in terms of purely economic terms (i.e., annual income in dollars). “Low-income” as a concept, then, is understood in terms of the methods one uses to acquire food; that is, one’s ability to purchase food and one’s reliance on alternative methods of acquiring food, including use of

government programs like SNAP, WIC, and other programs for children and the elderly (Morton et al. 2005:95); food pantries, meal centers, and collective kitchens (Hamelin, Mercier and Bélard 2008); and reliance on goods and services exchanges between family and friends (Morton et al. 2005:107).

### *Food security situation*

Food security can be approached in different ways. Traditionally, food security as a concept has been associated with household food security, defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Food security includes at a minimum: the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.” Food insecurity, then, is understood by the USDA to be “limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Cohen 2002:3). Food security is not limited to the household level; it can also be observed and measured in communities. According to USDA standards, communities can be identified as food insecure if:

- There are inadequate resources from which people can purchase foods.
- The available food purchasing resources are not accessible to all community members.
- The food available through the resources is not sufficient in quantity or variety.
- The food is not competitively priced and thus is not affordable to all households.
- There are inadequate food assistance resources to help low-income people purchase food at retail markets.
- There are no local food production resources.
- Locally produced food is not available to community members.

- There is no support for local food production resources.
- There is any significant household food security insecurity within the community.

(Cohen 2002:3)

There are obvious ties between household and community levels of food insecurity. While this study is intended to focus on community food insecurity and the potential for change on the community level, individuals are used as the unit of analysis in order to assess the individual's interaction with, and existence within, larger structural systems that affect food security and access.

#### *Viable mechanisms to increase potential involvement*

This aspect of the present research focuses on benefits and programs that could be targeted specifically toward low-income residents to encourage involvement in the grocery cooperative. As part of their organizing values, grocery cooperatives are often involved in their communities beyond creating local jobs and contributing to the local economy; cooperatives across the country offer an array of programs that are open to community members. Recommendations for viable programs will be discussed in a later section.

#### *Participants in the Study*

Because of the multi-stage structure of this study, different types of participants were recruited for different aspects of this research. The first stage involved identifying key stakeholders in the community; that is, individuals who have significant investment in or knowledge of the food situation in Bloomington-Normal, available community resources, and/or challenges faced by low-income households in acquiring food. Researchers initially identified six categories of community organizations from which key stakeholders would be recruited, including food banks, religious organizations, community centers, education and youth

programs, government programs and services, and immigrant groups. Researchers' discussions with key stakeholders were intended to assist in developing locally-relevant questions for low-income households for subsequent stages of research. In addition, we hoped to understand the role that these stakeholders play in the food system in the Bloomington-Normal community, as well as gain an understanding of the current food security situation and the food needs of the community, specifically of low-income households, from the perspective of these community services providers. Finally, researchers intended to better understand what programs are currently being utilized and underutilized from the perspective of these community services providers.

The subsequent stage of this research involved conversations with low-income residents. This population was selected strategically as a means by which to either corroborate or disprove perceived needs and challenges presented in the relevant literature and discussions with key stakeholders. As Rowe (2010) and Hamelin et al. (2008) demonstrate, needs and challenges related to food are often culturally and contextually specific. Because of this, the needs perceived by stakeholders, however well-intentioned they are, may not match the needs seen and felt by those experiencing food insecurity. Low-income residents are also able to provide insight regarding what form the grocery cooperative could and should take (i.e., what benefits to offer, what types of community programs to develop, etc.) in order to appeal to, and increase involvement among, individuals and households with shared socioeconomic experiences.

This study is guided by research questions addressing present food and nutritional needs and food security among low-income residents in the Bloomington-Normal community. In addition, this research addresses what the grocery cooperative could offer to entice involvement among low-income households and the cooperative's efficacy in meeting the needs and

challenges of households who experience food insecurity. What follows is a more detailed discussion of the research methods employed in this process.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The primary purposes of this research are exploratory; we intend to provide Green Top with the information they need to conduct additional research in the future. Consequently, we decided that conducting key informant interviews and focus groups would establish a strong foundation for subsequent investigations because we hoped to gain locally-relevant information. Furthermore, as Ragin and Amoroso (2010) describe, one of the foremost goals of social research is to give voice, whereby those who may be marginalized from community development processes are offered an opportunity to share their perspectives. We sought to include the voices of low-income residents in the Bloomington-Normal area in Green Top Grocery's development decisions.

First, we conducted nine key informant interviews. Key informant interviews are often employed as a stepping-stone to familiarize researchers with their chosen topic. The idea is to find knowledgeable and well-connected gatekeepers in the community willing to volunteer their expertise (Class notes). We approached the key informant interviews with four goals in mind. First, we wanted to develop locally-relevant questions for low-income households regarding food security. Second, we hoped to understand interview participants' roles in the food system. Third, we needed to understand the current food security situation from the perspective of direct service providers. Finally, we sought to grasp which food programs were commonly utilized and/or underutilized in the Bloomington-Normal area.

The research team separated into four groups and conducted nine key informant interviews with five organizations. Key informant interview participants were selected based on

non-probability purposive sampling (Babbie 2010). Thus, all organizations were found through independent inquiries on the part of the research team and derived from a mix of online sources and personal contacts. The final list of associations was winnowed from a litany of organizations connected to food needs in the Bloomington-Normal area. After we discussed the relevance and utility of all the contacts listed, interviews with individuals in the final five organizations were pursued. All participants were contacted by members of the research team and interview dates were set at a time and place of each participant's choosing.

The interview teams consisted of two to three researchers. Typically, one team member acted as an interviewer while the others took notes. All participants were read the informed consent letter and asked to sign it if they agreed to participate in the research process. All interviews were guided by ten core questions; however, the interviews were semi-structured to encourage pertinent and ad hoc probes by interviewers. As Weiss (1994) recommends, when participants dropped significant markers, interviewers followed up on these themes as soon as possible rather than strictly following the interview protocol. Notably, there are no universally agreed upon methods of analyzing qualitative data. In this project, the research team roughly followed guidelines set by John and Lyn Lofland (1995). Each researcher listed a multiplicity of initial themes and after coming together, honed in on a finalized list of key findings.

A notable key limitation to conducting key informant interviews is that because of the non-probability sampling method employed, the findings are not generalizable. Still, the primary purposes of this study are exploratory and key informant interviews provide levels of depth and context that are critical to establishing a baseline for future studies. For example, in this research, the findings that arose from key informant interviews helped develop the second stage of this

research process: focus groups. Also known as group interviews, focus groups are a qualitative research tool often utilized in exploratory studies (Babbie 2010).

The research team decided to employ focus groups because they are a flexible and cost-effective means of giving voice. In addition, focus groups allow researchers to probe deeply into a given topic. For this study, four focus groups at two community centers in the Bloomington-Normal area were planned. Administrators at these organizations were approached about the desired plan to conduct focus groups and both agreed to collaborate. These centers were strategically selected by the research team because their services target low-income families in the Bloomington-Normal area, thus improving the likelihood that participants would represent the target demographic for our study. Both of these centers agreed to allow members of the research team to come and pass out informational fliers to their clients. Administrators at these organizations also handed out fliers to their clients prior to the focus groups. The research team also posted fliers at nearby churches and other community centers in order to spread the word about this study. In an effort to increase potential participation, each focus group provided food and free child care.

In the end, three out of the four focus groups were completed on the 22nd and 30th of October, as well as on the 5th of November. On the 29th of October, no participants showed up and the team was forced to cancel. Otherwise, each of the focus groups included eight, six, and five people respectively. The vast majority of participants were women; only one man participated in any of the focus groups. In addition, participants came from a variety of backgrounds. One focus group was almost entirely composed of Hispanic participants and a volunteer at the host site translated all communication between moderators and participants. Another included a number of African American women and Chinese immigrants. The majority



of participants volunteered to be in these focus groups the same day they were taking place; offering food and childcare seemed to play an important role in people's decision to stay. Thus, participants in this study represent a non-probability sample of convenience.

Two moderators led each focus group. The first person led discussion while the other wrote key themes on a whiteboard for participants to reference during the conversation. The remainder of the research team was spread throughout the room taking notes or engaged in childcare outside. Ideally, focus groups have well-trained highly skilled moderators (Babbie 2010). In this case, everyone on the team participated in a mock focus group session and all were equally prepared to act as moderators. Thus, for each focus group, team members alternated between those who led discussion with those who took notes or provided childcare. Each focus group followed a semi-structured group interview format. Besides an introductory icebreaker, moderators asked eight sequential questions of focus group participants. However, much like the key informant interviews, moderators were encouraged to follow up on key markers and pursue novel themes that surfaced throughout the process. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

Reflexivity is also a key consideration when conducting qualitative research (Stacey 1988; Heyl 2001). Race, gender, and levels of education, among other characteristics, all influence research decisions. Thus, despite our best efforts to approach this project as a means of giving voice, the possibility of unintended exploitation is always present. While the awareness of such issues at best minimally lessens the chances of unforeseen exploitation, it is likely that the best researchers can do is to be as reflexively aware as possible (Blee 1998; Heyl 2001). Our research team was composed of nine Caucasian graduate students in three disciplines: political science, economics, and sociology. One professor in the Department of Sociology facilitated our

work. Furthermore, the research team includes five women and four men. We acknowledge that we may be perceived as being in a position of power that may influence the questions that are asked, the analyses, and the interactions with study participants; we sought to be as cognizant as possible of the power we wield as social researchers.

As with the key informant interviews, note takers in each of the focus group sessions compiled and e-mailed their observations to the entire research team. Subsequently, each researcher e-mailed a preliminary list of key themes to our findings team, who analyzed these lists along with the raw data to discern the key conclusions of this study. Again, the process of preliminary to more advanced stages of coding roughly follows the research guidelines set by John and Lyn Lofland (1995). Overall, focus groups do not offer generalizable findings. However, the process lends itself to depth over breadth and serves the purposes of an exploratory study exceptionally well. Thus, primarily, these findings will bolster future studies for Green Top Grocery on this topic.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

*“Money, we go shopping when we have money. It doesn’t matter what’s on sale if we don’t have money.”*

*(Bloomington resident when asked about challenges her family faces in regards to food access)*

*“Some stores have better produce than others... if you have that extra buck it’s worth it to spend on something that will last longer.”*

*(Bloomington resident when asked about challenges with quality of food available)*

### ***Key Informant Interviews***

The following conclusions are drawn from nine key informant interviews conducted with non-profit or government agencies in the Bloomington-Normal area that deal in some way with

food needs, whether through food assistance programs or early childhood education programs.<sup>1</sup> Researchers conducted the nine interviews in person or by telephone in September 2012. Informants were contacted by telephone or e-mail to determine interest in participating in this research. In the opinion of our research team, the agencies that participated were happy to discuss issues regarding food needs of the Bloomington-Normal area and were very helpful. The issues addressed during these key informant interviews were valuable in informing our questions for focus groups.

### ***Common Themes from Key Informant Interviews***

*“Cost and lack of education about nutritional foods.”*

*(Key informant when asked about challenges to food access and nutrition among low-income residents)*

*“When it comes to a new ‘grocer’ in town, trust in this new place needs to travel by word-of-mouth among the Hispanic community.”*

*(Key informant about the usefulness of a grocery cooperative)*

In general, key informants discussed issues regarding nutrition and a need for education to encourage healthier food choices. Most of the key informants provide short-term or emergency assistance, but addressed the importance of long-term education efforts to teach young people about nutrition. Other issues addressed in these interviews dealt with challenges faced by their clients in regards to food access. A variety of challenges to food access were addressed, including transportation, convenience, and money to name a few.

General opinions from key informants regarding a grocery cooperative were that it might be inaccessible to their usual clients because of price and a lack of familiarity with the concept. Some key informants stressed that this information about the cooperative would have to spread by reputation and word-of-mouth to be regarded as a familiar concept.

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<sup>1</sup> See Methods section for more detail on how key informants were selected.

## ***Nutrition***

Many of the key informants mentioned that nutrition was an issue for their clients. Respondents also discussed their attempt to provide education about nutrition so that they (the clients) could make better food choices. In an effort at meeting long-term food needs, there is a focus on changing the eating habits of children because of the view that starting nutrition education young will transfer into a healthy life as an adult. Most of the agencies interviewed offer a variety of classes on nutrition or budgeting. If classes were not currently offered at a particular agency, there was a belief that they would be beneficial to clients. Key informants stressed the use of community networks as a way to refer clients to agencies that could provide education on nutrition and healthy cooking.

Along with efforts in educating, key informants addressed the importance of sensitivity toward the clients using food assistance programs, as well as finding ways of empowering them. One agency called this approach a “participant services model,” which allows for more of a discussion with participants, focusing on the things that clients want to focus on. This particular agency attempts to encourage conversation, but not lead it. Another agency recently changed its program so that rather than requiring clients to go to certain programming, they are now encouraged, but ultimately have the choice to decide if they will go and which ones they will go to. Likewise, a third agency changed from giving out bags of pre-packaged food to its clients to having the clients choose the food they want, which also assists with certain dietary needs and allows them to choose what is appropriate for them.

## ***Challenges to Food Access***

Key informants discussed many challenges faced by low-income residents regarding food access, including: transportation, availability of quality foods, and money. Key informants

addressed the issue of transportation because some of their clients do not have access to a vehicle and so they stressed the need of location of services; being along a bus route is key. Without a vehicle, many low-income residents travel to the store by bus, which can be time-consuming and limits the amount of food they can carry. Individuals with children who rely on public transportation face additional difficulties. Another challenge is the availability of fresh, nutritious foods. Key informants believed that the participation of low-income residents in alternative food outlets, like farmers' markets, are often lacking because individuals do not feel welcome in that space. Key informants believed that low-income residents may not purchase fresh food or healthy options because they are not sure how to prepare or store it.

Money was another issue addressed by key informants, who believed that price is a major factor in purchasing choices among low-income individuals. Their ability to use food stamps or SNAP benefits at a store is also part of their shopping decisions. Another key informant indicated summer as a peak time, pointing to the challenge of having to feed their children three times a day, rather than just once or twice during the school year. One agency also pointed to the end of the month as a peak time when low-income residents seek food assistance, which they believe is directly related to income.

### ***What is a Cooperative?***

Many of the key informants were confused by the term grocery cooperative. Some of the confusion included believing that the cooperative would be a charity of some sort, and many initially compared the idea of ownership with membership in Sam's Club. In regards to their clients' likelihood of shopping at a grocery cooperative, key informants were largely skeptical. Key informants believed that the grocery cooperative could be successful if it utilized existing networks to build trust with those in the low-income community. This includes using

organizations like community centers, schools, and governmental organizations to spread the word. Reputation was really important and word of mouth in the community would be the most influential in their decision to shop there. One key informant stressed that trust is an important aspect in working to involve the community and that individuals need to feel safe in their interactions with the grocery cooperative.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Conclusions from Key Informant Interviews***

These interviews with key informants provided a preliminary needs assessment of low-income residents in the Bloomington-Normal area regarding access to food. Among the most significant findings include a need to define a grocery cooperative. Education was also a key factor in low-income areas; nearly all informants addressed the importance of educating about healthy choices and nutrition. Key informants addressed issues regarding food access, which the researchers used to create an interview guide with low-income residents in the focus groups. These findings contributed to the development of our focus group protocol.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Focus Groups***

Focus groups were employed because we believed them to be the best way address our research questions. Our research aims to assess the current food and nutritional needs and desires of low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, develop recommendations for Green Top Grocery to improve the food security situation in the Bloomington-Normal community, and develop recommendations for the most viable mechanisms to increase potential involvement in Green Top Grocery among low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal.

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<sup>2</sup> This comment about trust was made in reference to non-native English speakers, specifically in regards to the Hispanic population.

<sup>3</sup> See Methods section for more details of how the focus group protocol was developed. The protocol can be found in the appendix E

The following conclusions are drawn from three focus groups with individuals living in the Bloomington-Normal area. The first focus group was held on October 22, 2012 and had a total of eight in attendance. The second was held October 30; the total attendance for this focus group was six participants. The final focus group was held on November 5 and had a total attendance of five participants.

It is worth noting that the three focus groups represented a variety of identifying characteristics. Participants in the first focus group were all Hispanic and were grouped by family and age ranged from teenager to senior citizen. The makeup of the second focus group featured all women, two non-native English speakers, and featured less diversity in regards to age range with nearly all participants being middle-aged. The third focus group was comprised of all native English speakers and age ranged from teenager to senior citizen.

### ***Common Themes from Focus Groups***

Focus group participants were asked to discuss ways they access food and challenges regarding that access. This was an attempt to answer our first research question about current food and nutritional needs. At the start of each focus group, participants were asked what types of foods are typically prepared in their household. Participants discussed their shopping habits and any challenges they experience regarding access to food. Participants widely discussed a desire to learn how to cook healthy meals. Price was an issue that was brought up at each focus group. Participants also emphasized children in regards to nutrition and wants for the future, many were interested in programs geared towards educating children about healthy eating.

Focus group participants revealed how they look for convenience in grocery shopping, but there was a general consensus that gas station convenience stores were too expensive. Participants also addressed how they are more likely to cook at home rather than eating out

because it is much more cost-efficient. Participants were also asked about how they would change their current situation as well as what might motivate them to shop at a grocery cooperative, which will help to inform future activities and directions for Green Top.

### ***Challenges to Food Access***

Many focus group participants expressed the belief that healthy foods are too expensive and often inaccessible. Participants shared that where they shop is largely determined by prices and often the quality of fresh produce is poor. Many also discussed how they budget by shopping at stores that have the best sales. In regards to shopping habits, most stated that they go grocery shopping one to two times a week. This carried with it a concern about making sure the produce was of good quality and that it would stay fresh by the time it would be eaten.

Location of a new grocery store was important to focus group participants. Some said that they would not want to go out of their way to shop. However, the general consensus was that if there was better quality food they might make the trip. For those without access to a vehicle, travel by bus is most common, and they expressed that they were more likely to shop at a grocery store if it were located along a bus route.

### ***What is a Cooperative?***

Similar to the key informant interviews, focus group participants were largely unaware of the concept of a grocery cooperative. The overall feeling was that it needed to be a physical entity before participants were likely to invest in ownership. This coincided with the notion of having a good reputation, that is community members would hear positive things about the store in regards to variety of foods or even friendliness of workers, in order to get participants from the low-income community. The notion of ownership needs to be explained more clearly as well. Participants thought it might be similar to Sam's Club, while others wanted to know about the



responsibilities or even liabilities of being a co-owner. A cooperative needs to be clearly defined along with the benefits of ownership so that residents understand that it is not like Sam's Club for instance.

### ***Motivations to Shop at a Grocery Cooperative***

Participants were asked what would make them likely to shop at a grocery cooperative. Since there was some confusion about the concept of a cooperative, focus group facilitators explained that grocery cooperatives often offer community-centered events and programming. Answers from participants ranged from community programs to outreach activities. Participants expressed an interest in taking cooking classes to learn how to prepare healthy foods. Along with cooking classes, there was an interest in learning how to buy good produce and how to preserve it. One participant gave the idea of the cooperative having "tasting stations," which would provide the opportunity to sample foods that they might not have considered trying before.

Participants were also concerned with how a cooperative might benefit the community. They expressed wanting to see the cooperative invest in the community by partnering with local schools. One example was to hold an essay contest where kids could write about what nutrition means to them. Others expressed an interest in a community garden. Another common theme that was important to focus group participants was the need for the grocery cooperative to recognize the diversity of the community. Examples of how this could be accomplished included having food items that reflect diversity of cultures, having promotional items in many languages, and providing recipes to make it more accessible to non-English speaking households.

### ***Unexpected Findings***

There were several common themes that arose that the researchers did not expect. One theme related to the social aspects of shopping. Participants discussed how they were unwilling

to shop at a store where the workers were rude to them or other shoppers. Participants spoke about the need for respect and friendliness of workers. Participants indicated the importance of feeling welcome when grocery shopping, whether this means having friendly workers or if the store has products that make it easy to shop, for example products in multiple languages. The consensus was that they would not go back to places where the employees were unfriendly to them, even if that meant paying higher prices.

Another unexpected theme that was addressed several times was about programs that could be offered by the grocery cooperative that researchers had not considered. This could have largely been the result of confusion about the concept of a cooperative, but many participants discussed an interest in children's programs, not necessarily food-specific, such as an after-school program. Another program that was discussed was in regards to job training, or perhaps the cooperative employing people in need.

### ***Overall Themes from Focus Groups***

The general findings from the focus groups were that people are genuinely concerned about their food choices. Participants expressed concern for their future health and recognize the importance of nutrition. Most expressed a need for better quality produce, especially if it is at a fair price. Participants from the focus groups may be unlikely to consider ownership in the cooperative until it is a well-defined entity. Education concerning nutrition was a key theme in each focus group; participants were interested in learning how to cook healthy food and how to budget to be able to purchase better quality, healthy foods. Participants were interested in the grocery cooperative, but more needs to be done to make it a familiar concept among low-income households. Participants were also very interested in programs geared towards educating children

about healthy eating. Many participants believed strongly in the importance of teaching children healthy eating habits at a young age, which would lead to being healthy in the future.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

We chose to conduct focus groups in order to give voice to the needs and desires of low-income residents in Bloomington-Normal. However, this method also has its limitations. Perhaps the greatest weakness here is that information gained from the focus groups is not generalizable to either the Bloomington-Normal population in general or the population of those neighborhoods where the focus groups were conducted. This lack of generalizability is due to the fact that we employed non-probability sampling. There were several factors that limited this research: time and location conflicts, number of participants, and self-selection bias to name a few.

Time issues and location issues restricted the possibility of participation in the focus groups conducted here. All of the focus groups were conducted in the evening (5:00p.m. or 7:00p.m.) on a Monday or a Tuesday at either Western Avenue Community Center or the Unity Community Center. Additionally, since the focus groups were hosted at after-school program sites, it occurred often that the children did not want to stay any longer. This meant that any person with time conflicts (such as employment) or transportation conflicts would have been unable to participate. How much this restricted the basis of participation is difficult to determine.

The number of participants in each focus group, and the three focus groups combined is insufficient to generalize the findings to any broader populations. Combined the three focus groups had a total of 18 participants. However, as previously mentioned, the central themes of the three focus groups were convergent in several ways. This suggests that this study reached

some degree of saturation of the viewpoints of the participants in the focus groups (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

Self-selection bias refers to the fact that participants chose to take part in this research and whether there are notable distinctions between those who do or do not participate. An example of this is reflected in the ratio of males to females participating in this study. Perhaps a reason for this discrepancy is that the focus groups were hosted at after-school program sites where mothers were picking up their children. Out of the three focus groups conducted (total of 18 participants) there was one male participant. However, this particular limitation can be viewed as a strength in some ways. Those who did end up participating in the focus group are likely those individuals who are interested in the topics presented, such as food security issues. This means that while the information is not generalizable to broader populations, it does provide valuable viewpoints of interested participants.

As mentioned previously, researchers were also acutely aware of their presence during the focus groups and tried as best as possible not to influence the participants. As graduate students, we acknowledge that we were in a position of perceived power that may influence the questions asked, the analyses, and the interactions with participants. While we intended to give voice to participants, we sought to be as cognizant as possible of the power we wielded as social researchers.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Low-income residents of Bloomington-Normal care about the health of their children and families. Green Top Grocery has the opportunity to better meet the needs of low-income households, as well as to involve them in the development of the cooperative and future programs. The following are specific recommendations for Green Top Grocery as they continue

to develop so that low-income residents have the knowledge and accessibility to participate in the cooperative.

*Use existing networks to build trust in the community*

Trust and comfort is a major concern for community members. Many key informants emphasized the importance of building trust through existing networks. Residents are more likely to be receptive to a new grocery cooperative if the information and invitation to participate comes from a trusted community source. Heartland Headstart, UNITY Community Center, and the Western Avenue Community Center have strong ties to low-income residents, and especially to parents of children who attend after school programs. Building a relationship with these organization leaders, in addition to community churches, schools, and social services, will help Green Top Grocery to reach residents who may not have trusted information from an unfamiliar source.

Some residents will inherently feel like a grocery cooperative is “not a place for them.” Many will not even enter the grocery store because of the uncertainty of how they will be treated as customers. In order to counter this insecurity, Green Top can work with established organizations and networks to educate residents on the mission and purpose of the grocery cooperative. Working in collaboration with organization leaders to initiate communication among residents will ease hesitation or skepticism of a grocery cooperative. This is of special importance to the Hispanic community in Bloomington-Normal due to language barriers and perceived racial intolerance. Also, meeting the members of existing organizations to discuss the unique needs among their residents will help to expose Green Top as an involved member of the community and represent its willingness to involve low-income households.

### *Education about grocery cooperatives*

Often during our focus groups, participants did not have a working knowledge of a grocery cooperative. Participants would liken a grocery cooperative to a Sam's Club membership or they would think it is an exclusive "members only" store. One suggestion to educate residents on the business model and benefits of a grocery cooperative is to produce a short video. Focus group participants suggested a video that can be shared on the Internet, in both English and Spanish, which uses visuals to explain the grocery cooperative. The video would also be beneficial if there were scenes of the grocery store's environment and products. Also, an important factor for successful communication with the community is speech use. Educating the community using clear, concise speech in promotional material is crucial. According to one key informant, most of the adults in low-income areas have a reading comprehension at or below the seventh grade level. Using visuals, colors, and labels will help explain concepts of ownership, cooperatives, and local food.

Another essential component of educating the community is to include multilingual marketing pieces. There are a range of languages spoken in the Bloomington-Normal community. Creating marketing pieces, as well as ownership agreements, in different languages will help communicate with a broader range of residents. Working with existing organizations to understand which languages are spoken in the community will help decide which languages to translate materials in.

### *Green Top Grocery store operations*

Although Green Top is in the early stages of development, some key suggestions from the focus groups pertain to the everyday operation of the grocery store. Most residents identified location as an influential factor in where they shop for food. Regardless of location within the

Bloomington-Normal community, Green Top could consider locating close to the Connect Transit bus routes. Even better would be if Green Top considered having an easy-access bus route or employ a shuttle back and forth from the grocery to the nearest bus stop for those who are elderly or disabled. Residents who do not own a car typically use the bus as transportation to go grocery shopping. This puts limitations on the amount of food, as well as the kinds of food, they can purchase. Some residents also have young children when they travel, so locating where the bus ride is as short as possible would help families as they grocery shop.

The general consensus about the grocery store atmosphere is that the produce should be fresh, signs should be clearly displayed (preferably in multiple languages), and the overall appearance should be clean and well-lit. One resident suggested having taste testing in the store with fresh fruit and vegetables that residents may be unfamiliar with. Another resident was concerned about how child friendly the facility would be, especially because she has young children with her as she grocery shops. Designing the facility with family's needs in mind would help mothers feel comfortable bringing children into the store.

One of the greatest themes among the focus groups in regards to Green Top as a whole concerns issues of respect and customer service. Focus group members were greatly concerned with how they would be treated by store employees. Especially among residents in which English is a second language and residents that receive financial assistance, friendly service and respect are major motivators for shopping at a cooperative. Also, feeling like they could approach staff with questions without the fear of being judged was a concern among residents. Placing special attention on training staff to be friendly and knowledgeable could be a consideration for Green Top. Finally, creating the position of a community outreach employee

who is visible in the store and able to communicate with a range of residents could also help Green Top to include low-income residents in the cooperative.

### *Potential programs*

Green Top Grocery may not be able to compete with the food prices offered by Wal-Mart and other chain grocery stores. However, Green Top does have the unique potential to offer residents food and nutrition education programs. Some programs residents expressed interest in included cooking lessons on how to prepare traditional ethnic food in a healthy way (less fat and oils, fresh ingredients, etc.), and classes that teach people how to shop for fresh food (how to know when a vegetable is ripe, how much to buy at a time) and also how to prolong the life of fresh food once it is purchased.

Programs involving children would also attract families. An interest in cooking and nutrition classes for children and teens were popular among respondents. One mother explained during the focus group that she wants her children to learn healthy eating habits early so that they will not have health issues later in life. Also, providing nutritious snack options during the programs will help children understand how to make healthy food choices. The idea of early introduction to nutritious eating and leading healthy lifestyles was apparent throughout the focus groups. Using existing networks that work with children to market these programs would help expose low-income households to potential programs. Respondents also seemed interested in community gardens, which could help them learn where their food comes from.

### *Future research*

The study done here suggests that Green Top may want to consider the fact that Bloomington-Normal has a diverse population in which English is not necessarily the primary language. Focus group data show Spanish as one language in particular to consider. However,



the limitations here prevent this study from making more specific recommendations concerning language. With full information about the various languages spoken in this community, Green Top would be able to determine the viability and cost efficiency of catering to these different groups. Questions to be considered in future research include:

- What non-English languages are used as a primary source of communication in Bloomington-Normal?
- How many non-English speaking individuals (of each particular language) live in Bloomington-Normal?
- Where do non-English speaking individuals reside in Bloomington-Normal?
- Would catering to these specific groups increase the likelihood of members of those groups frequenting Green Top Grocery and/or becoming co-owners?

As mentioned previously, this study has found a multitude of suggestions for potential programming. However, similar to the language situation, this study is unable to determine the generalizability for these suggestions, such as the intensity of demand for each of the programs. Future research in this area could aid Green Top in determining what programs are most likely to be broadly successful for the community as a whole. Questions that aim to meet this end are as follows:

- Would residents be willing to participate in (insert program here)?
- Which programs do/would residents in the area value most?

We stress that this study is intended to be an initial assessment of the food security situation in the area. From this base of knowledge a more comprehensive and complete analysis can occur. In order to achieve this, we suggest the next logical step in research is to administer a

quantitative survey to residents of the area (language barriers considered), using a scientifically selected random sample survey of Bloomington/Normal residents. With the suggestions mentioned here, a survey would work to provide data that is more generalizable and representative of the broader community population. Ultimately, we hope this study plays a role in providing a clear illustration of the food security situation in Bloomington-Normal to both Green-Top Grocery and the general public, and how a grocery cooperative such as Green Top may help to meet these needs into the future.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Making Contact with Potential Key Informant Interviewees:**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am a graduate student with the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University.

In collaboration with the Green Top Grocery Cooperative, we are working on an assessment of the food security needs and opportunities for involvement in the cooperative among low income residents within the Bloomington/Normal communities. Your name was identified as someone who has involvement with food security or food justice efforts within the community. I am hoping that you will be willing to talk to us about your perspectives on the current food security needs or issues and possible ways that the Green Top Grocery might better serve these needs and involve residents in the cooperative.

I would like to schedule a time and location that is convenient for you to discuss these issues a bit more in person. It is important for us to speak directly with key stakeholders such as yourself that have direct knowledge and experience with food security and food justice issues, to better understand what could be improved in the future. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the issues and possible ways that the Green Top Grocery Cooperative might work to engage a broader diversity of residents in the cooperative and meet their needs. The interview should last between 45-60 minutes. Is there a time in the next week that would work for you?

*\*\*Please confirm the location to meet and then thank them for their time.*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Key Informant Interview Consent Form

In collaboration with the Green Top Grocery Cooperative, a group of graduate students at Illinois State University are working on an assessment of food security needs among low income households in Bloomington/Normal. The Green Top Grocery Cooperative “is a cooperatively owned business that cultivates personal, environmental, and economic well-being through a commitment to ethical business practices, financial accessibility, fair wages, community education, and the support of local and sustainable farmers and producers.” In support of this mission, this assessment will examine current food security needs and potential mechanisms to better serve those needs via programming and other avenues at the grocery cooperative. The first phase of this project involves speaking to key stakeholders and informants who have knowledge about the current food security needs and barriers within the Bloomington/Normal community. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the needs and assets specific to the issue of food security and food justice.

The interview will last between 30-45 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of your role in the food system, understanding the current food security situation and the needs from the perspective of the service provider, and understanding what programs are being utilized or under-utilized, from the perspective of the service provider. Results from these interviews will be used to develop survey or focus group questions for low-income residents to better understand the situation from their perspective. The final results from this project will be provided to the Green Top Grocery Cooperative to inform and help guide them in the continued development of a local grocery cooperative that will best meet the needs of a diverse population.

Your participation is completely voluntary and all information will remain confidential. Participation does not involve any specific risks and the only benefits would be helping to improve the sustainability and well-being of your neighborhood, especially as it relates to food security and food justice. If you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: [jmbrehm@ilstu.edu](mailto:jmbrehm@ilstu.edu). You may also contact Illinois State University’s Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.

#### Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and know that my responses will remain confidential. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and participation.

## APPENDIX C

### Key Informant Questions

1. Does your organization focus on emergency/immediate needs or do you focus more on long-term self-reliance needs?
  - a. How do you do that?
2. Can you tell us about any specific programs that you offer that assist with food security issues (short term or long term)?
3. Do you provide any education programs on food systems, nutrition, etc?
  - a. Can you tell us more about them? How widely are they utilized?
4. Do you have any interaction with your clients about their needs or their current situation?
  - a. What is the nature of that interaction?
5. What food related problems do you see with your clients
  - a. What are the biggest challenges that low income residents face in terms of food access? Food nutrition?
6. What do you think would most improve the food security situation for low income residents?
7. What kind of feedback do you get from clients about what their desires are for improvement of their current situation?
8. Do you see health and nutrition problems as a major concern for your clients?
9. How might a food cooperative help (or not) meet these needs?
10. How do you think your clients might perceive a food cooperative?

## APPENDIX D

### Focus Group Consent Form

In collaboration with Green Top Grocery, a group of graduate students with Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development are working on an assessment of the food needs of residents in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. In particular, we are trying to understand how the food needs of local residents are being met, and what you envision for the future of your community. This project involves engaging in conversation with local residents in Bloomington-Normal to understand their views on these issues. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the food needs specific to the local residents within this community.

The focus group interview will last between 60-90 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of how local residents perceive issues related to food needs, accessibility, and their future vision for their community. Results from this project will be provided to Green Top Grocery to inform their broader planning efforts to bring a grocery cooperative to Bloomington-Normal and to allow them to develop specific strategies to address any needs or concerns that were raised as part of this research.

Your participation in completely voluntary and all reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality. Since the focus group session takes place in a group setting and others are privy to your responses, I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. However, your name will not be associated with the data collected and only group data will be reported. Only those directly involved with the project will have access to focus group notes. Participation does not involve any specific risks other than perhaps some discomfort when revealing personal feelings in the focus group setting. Participation does not involve any individual benefits other than helping to inform key stakeholders of needs regarding food access. If you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you remain for the discussion, this indicates your consent to participate in the study. If you have any questions or if we can be of any assistance, please feel free to call Joan M. Brehm (project director) at (309) 438-7177, or email her at [jmbrehm@ilstu.edu](mailto:jmbrehm@ilstu.edu). You may also contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.

#### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and understand that others will be present during the focus group session. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time and participation.



## APPENDIX D

### Documento de Consentimiento para Mesa Redonda

Un grupo de estudiantes afiliados con el Centro Stevenson para el Desarrollo Comunitario y Económico en la Universidad Estatal de Illinois están colaborando con una organización comunitaria que se llama, Green Top Grocery. Todos estamos interesados en investigar las necesidades nutricionales y de comida en la comunidad. Particularmente, estamos interesados en comprender cuáles son las necesidades nutricionales en la comunidad y cómo estas son realizadas dentro de la familia. Su contribución y opinión serán de mucha ayuda para nuestra investigación.

La entrevista durará entre 60 y 90 minutos. Las preguntas abarcan temas sobre las necesidades nutricionales en nuestra comunidad, el acceso a comida nutritiva, y la fuente de la comida en el futuro. Los resultados de este proyecto serán compartidos con la organización, Green Top Grocery, porque ellos están interesados en establecer una cooperativa de alimentación en Bloomington-Normal.

Su participación es completamente voluntaria y confidencial, y no habrá forma de que nadie pueda identificar su participación en este proyecto. Su nombre NO va a ser usado como forma de identificación y ningún dato personal será usado como parte de esta investigación. Solamente las personas involucradas directamente con el proyecto van a tener acceso a la información presentada. Su participación será muy importante para este proyecto porque nos dará forma de conocer las necesidades nutricionales en la comunidad. Si en algún momento usted no quiere participar, puede hacérselos saber y no habrá ningún problema. Si tiene alguna pregunta por favor no deje de comunicarse con Joan Brehm (directora del proyecto) al (309) 438-7177, o envíe un correo electrónico al [jmbrehm@ilstu.edu](mailto:jmbrehm@ilstu.edu). También puede llamar a la oficina que se encarga de evaluar y supervisar las investigaciones que se hacen en la universidad al (309) 438-8451.

#### **Declaración de Consentimiento:**

He leído la información. Mis preguntas sobre el proyecto han sido contestadas a mi gusto. Consentido participar en el proyecto y comprendo que otras personas van a estar presente durante la entrevista. Comprendo que una copia de esta forma es para mí.

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_ Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_

Gracias por su participación.

## APPENDIX E

### Focus Group Questions: Final

#### Opening question:

What brought you here tonight?  
What is your favorite food?

#### Current Food Needs/Situation:

1. What kinds of foods does your family most often prepare?  
How many are being cooked for?  
Do you eat out a lot?  
Why or why not?
  
2. What are the ways in which your family acquires food?  
For example, where do you go to get food?  
For example, how far do you go to get food?  
For example, how do you get there?
  
3. Are there any challenges or obstacles your family faces in accessing food?  
Can you tell us about what those might be?  
What about....  
Quantity of food available  
Quality of food available  
Variety of food available  
Availability of fresh produce  
Means of transportation (bus, private vehicle, carpool, etc.)

#### Bridge:

4. If you could change anything about how you or your family accesses food, what would it be?  
What would help you to make those changes?
  
5. Has anybody heard about a cooperative before? A grocery co-

#### Future (more focus on Green Top Grocery):

For the purposes of this group, we're going to discuss grocery cooperatives. A grocery cooperative is an organization where everyone is welcome to shop, but people can also choose to become more than shoppers. Anybody can make a one-time payment to become an owner of the business. As an owner, you along with other owners have the opportunity to make decisions about current products, future development, and community programs. Often, grocery cooperatives offer various programs to their communities that can be accessible to owners and the public.

6. What would motivate you or your family to shop at a grocery cooperative?

6a. If a new local grocery cooperative that offers community programs were accessible to you, what types of programs would be of interest to you and your family?

What sorts of programs do you feel that you need?

What sorts of programs would you most likely take advantage of?

Examples:

Cooking classes

Health and nutrition

Gardening

Children's programs

Budgeting (stretching your dollar)

6b. What would a grocery cooperative have to provide in order for you to consider becoming an owner?

Examples:

Discounts

Involvement in decisions about kinds of foods, price, etc.

Working hours for discounts on groceries

7. What else could a grocery cooperative do to help you meet your food needs?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share?

# Let's talk about food!

*Participate in a conversation about food in your community*



**When:** Monday, October 29  
or Tuesday, October 30

7:00-8:30 p.m.

**Where:** UNITY Community  
Center, 632 Orlando Avenue  
Normal, IL 61761

Must live in  
Bloomington-  
Normal and be 18  
years or older to  
participate in the  
focus group.

Have your voice  
heard regarding  
food access for you  
and your family!

Sponsored by:  STEVENSON CENTER  
FOR COMMUNITY AND  
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
*Illinois State University*



***Free food and childcare will be provided!***

Questions or comments? Contact Joan Brehm by phone at 309-438-7177

## APPENDIX F



### LET'S TALK ABOUT FOOD

PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP

Participants will be asked to share experiences regarding ways you currently access food and your desires for future access. This is a great opportunity to have your voice heard on issues regarding food access in your community.

**When: October 23, 2012 at 6:00pm**

**Where: Western Avenue Community Center**, located at 600 N. Western Ave, Bloomington, IL

Food and childcare will be provided free for participants.

For more information, contact Dr. Joan Brehm at 309-438-7177.

#### Who Can Participate?

You can if you are...

-18 years or older,

-living in the Bloomington-Normal area,

-interested in discussing food



**STEVENSON CENTER**

FOR COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

*Illinois State University*

This study is conducted by the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development at Illinois State University and Green Top Grocery Cooperative.