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## Perceptions Of A Small Midwestern Food Cooperative: A Case Study

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# PERCEPTIONS OF A SMALL MIDWESTERN FOOD COOPERATIVE: A CASE STUDY

REBECCA FORSYTHE

123 Pages

The purpose of this research is to illuminate how individuals form perceptions of cooperatives, specifically of Green Top Grocery, a cooperative located in Bloomington Illinois, using the Bourdieuan habitus and notions of capital as a frame. Green Top Grocery suffers from fiscal instability since they opened in 2017. They also struggle to gain support of lower income individuals, a key demographic they sought to help since their inception based on their stated values. By conducting qualitative interviews of three sample groups: Green Top Grocery board members and leadership, local food access experts, and West Bloomington residents, and non-participant observations, this research can answer the following research questions: 1) What are the perceptions of food cooperatives in general, and Green Top specifically? 2) How are respondents' social location reflected in their motivations for consumption? and 3) How might Green Top Grocery's practices influence the formation of these perceptions? The results showed that differing social and cultural capital and differing habitus of each group caused a differentiation in the perceptions of Green Top Grocery, including individuals' consumption motivations, definitions of food access, and the future of the cooperative. The results showed that Green Top Grocery faced organizational and fiscal constraints during the planning process and the subsequent years after that could have perpetuated a negative reputation amongst community members, especially regarding a lack of diversity in participation for both race and class within the cooperative. Different perspectives on what food access meant created differing

understandings on how to address food access issues. For cooperatives, and especially Green Top Grocery, this meant creating more inclusive participation, with an emphasis on more equitable collaboration with lower-income residents and residents of color and collaborative understanding of food access, to prevent further perpetuation of alternative food institutions, such as cooperatives, as white spaces.

**KEYWORDS:** cooperatives; food systems; food studies; sociology; whiteness

PERCEPTIONS OF A SMALL MIDWESTERN FOOD COOPERATIVE: A CASE STUDY

REBECCA FORSYTHE

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Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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# PERCEPTIONS OF A SMALL MIDWESTERN FOOD COOPERATIVE: A CASE STUDY

REBECCA FORSYTHE

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Green Top Grocery, a membership-based food cooperative, opened their doors to the Bloomington-Normal, Illinois community in May of 2017 after several years of extensive planning. Their website states, “At Green Top Grocery, fresh, delicious food is just the beginning. Nourish your family. Discover local foods. Connect with others and help build a strong community. It all comes together at Green Top Grocery. Eat well. Do good.” Green Top Grocery had 2,102 owners (members) according to their Facebook page on July 26, 2019. As of 2019, they appeared to be having some financial difficulties and they started a campaign asking their members for small loans to help them through the financial challenges. One reason for opening in their specific location near the city center was to be relatively close to West Bloomington, an area considered low-income and more diverse in relation to the rest of the community. As the West Bloomington neighborhood is classified as a food desert, Green Top Grocery sought to address this by being the primary grocer in the area. Green Top Grocery struggles to attract many of the West Bloomington residents as co-op members or customers. This case study provides context as to why Green Top fails to serve low-income and racial minority populations in the West Bloomington Neighborhood, despite their extensive community planning with the hopes of making Green Top Grocery the most inclusive it could be. I looked specifically three different sample populations’, Green Top Grocery board and leadership, which is solely comprised one white women except for one white male, local food access experts including members of non-profits, and self-identified West Bloomington residents, to understand their perceptions about Green Top Grocery and what variables may be influencing these perceptions.

The goal of this study, then, is to look at how members of the GTG Board, food access experts, and residents of the West Bloomington neighborhood perceive of food cooperatives, and specifically Green Top Grocery and its development. I focused on examining how people's social status and milieu may affect their perception of the food cooperative as well as determining what practices Green Top Grocery may employ that are considered inclusionary or exclusionary that may, in turn, influence the appeal of GTG to various consumers and community members. This research sought to answer the following questions:

*What are the perceptions of food cooperatives in general, and Green Top specifically?*

*How are respondents' social location reflected in their motivations for consumption?*

*How might Green Top Grocery's practices influence the formation of perceptions?*

To answer these questions, I interviewed three different sample populations. These included five Green Top Grocery Board members and leadership representatives, four local food access experts including individuals working at local non-profits and four self-identified West Bloomington residents. My approach to understanding people's food and shopping choices was informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the habitus (1984) which was useful for understanding how tastes and preferences are produced by and often produce social class positions.

Previous research has been conducted in several areas relevant to this study, including cooperatives, ethical and sustainable consumption, consumption related to status, the alternative food movement, and local food. Despite this, there remains a lack of research on perceptions of food cooperatives, especially among those who do not engage with them. There is little research related to understanding the reasons behind lack of engagement for people, such as low-income persons. Jonason (2017) specifically calls for further research regarding why low-income persons do not engage in alternative food institutions, which could be addressed in this study, looking at

members of West Bloomington and their reasons why they are not engaging with Green Top Grocery. Further, research looking at perceptions of a food cooperative from a Bourdieu-sian framework related to habitus has not been conducted, especially in the form of looking for differences in relation to those who may or may not be supportive of a food cooperative. This study sought to fill this gap by looking both at people who may or may not be engaging with their local cooperative but also be looking at their perceptions through a Bourdieau-sian habitus framework. Practically, this research is not only useful for Green Top Grocery but also contributes to literature that will inform future cooperative practices to create a more inclusive environment, and further understanding of perceptions on cooperatives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, I used Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus as a theoretical framework to inform the ways I conceived of and interpreted my data. By using habitus, I looked at how distinct social milieus inform lifestyles that contribute to perceptions of food cooperatives, specifically Green Top Grocery. Pierre Bourdieu (1984:170) states of habitus,

*Habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (pricipium divisionis) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represents social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted.*

I looked at the ways in which both tastes, preferences, and perceptions inform expected class-based lifestyles and how these lifestyles then inform these same tastes, preferences, and perceptions. Abrasat et al. (2016) further explain Bourdieu's concept of habitus. They state that the concept of habitus looks at social stratification, based specifically on how tastes, preferences,

and perceptions create lifestyles that are distinct based on specific class and status-based markers. Further, they describe how stratification and social class are both linked to individual lifestyle and the tastes associated with those lifestyles. Illustrated is how other perspectives on habitus see it as a socializing process where one takes on the practices with the lifestyles, with less agency to necessarily choose their lifestyle. Then, through this socialization process, people might develop associated behaviors and patterns that reflect class backgrounds.

My research focused on tastes and preferences related to food consumption, that are also linked to perceptions about stores such as Green Top Grocery Cooperative. Bourdieu talks at length on food tastes in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984). He states of food choice,

*For a complete understanding of choices in this area, a particularly complex set of factors has to be borne in mind: the style of meal that people like to offer is no doubt a very good indicator of the image they wish to give or avoid giving to others and, as such, it is the systematic expression of a system of factors including, in addition to the indicators of the position occupied in the economic and cultural hierarchies, economic trajectory, social trajectory and cultural trajectory (Bourdieu 1984: 79).*

Therefore, my research took into consideration, when looking at food choice, all of the above: economic and cultural distinctions, economic mobility and social and cultural mobility. Looking at distinct foods and grocery shopping habits helped me to understand each participant's lifestyle to create a more cohesive, greater understanding as to their perceptions of cooperatives.

Bourdieu (1984:177) describes how different classes consume different foods, where the working classes will eat heartier, cheaper meals, where the bourgeoisie will consume lighter, leaner meals. He states that this is based on “a virtue made of necessity” where consumption is

based on income but also an expression of appearances of such. Further distance from necessity would mean higher status, more disposable income, and thus more choice.

Bourdieu (1984: 190) also discusses how views of the body and health are dependent on class, whereas upper classes, the bourgeoisie, are more likely to choose food products based on health and bodily aesthetic. Working class individuals might look more to foods that are hearty and cheap, more concerned with strength or sustenance. Foods are distinctly connected in this way to class-based views on health and bodily aesthetic, with their food consumption patterns reflective of these. As food cooperatives are often associated with natural foods, health foods, and alternative foods, not to mention local and organic produce, previous research has suggested that food cooperatives operate as a luxury grocery store as their food products come at a luxury cost due to these ethical considerations.

Based on previous research, (Alkon 2012; Alkon and McCullen 2010; Gilg, Barr, and Ford 2005; Haedicke 2014; Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018; Kennedy and Horne 2019; Slocum 2007) we know that shopping at food cooperatives, shopping sustainably and ethically, and at other alternative food institutions like farmers markets are considered a high-status practice. As this is the case, my research examined tastes, preferences, and perceptions of food and food cooperatives of West Bloomington residents to understand how their specific tastes, preferences, and perceptions led to a distinct lifestyle that either accepts or rejects food cooperatives as viable grocer for them. Bourdieu makes clear, though, that taste in food cannot be considered without identifying other lifestyle markers to see a complete view of one's relationship to their world (Bourdieu 1984: 193), meaning that my research took into consideration other identifying lifestyle characteristics that will inform the perceptions of the participants on Green Top Grocery.

## **A Contextual Overview of Bloomington, Illinois and Green Top Grocery**

Data from the US Census Bureau provides an important context for basic demographics and geography relative to this study. The estimated 2019 population for Bloomington, Illinois, is 77,330. Based on census data, 77.6 percent of that is white, with about 10 percent Black or African American, 8 percent Asian, and about 6 percent Hispanic or Latino. 95 percent of the persons 25 or older have a high school degree or higher and 48 percent of persons 25 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income is \$67,327. 12.5 percent of the Bloomington population is in poverty (United States Census Bureau 2020). When looking at data regarding socioeconomic needs of its residents, data was compiled from the Conduent Health Communities Institute SocioNeeds County Ranks, where they look at specific factors including poverty, education, unemployment, occupation, income and language. They rank communities on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being a positive SocioNeeds rank and 5 being a negative SocioNeeds rank. Bloomington's 61701 zip code ranked a 5, representing the highest socioeconomic need. This area comprises the West Bloomington neighborhood, with 36,197 residents (McLean County Community Needs Health Assessment 2019). Putting this data into the context of this study, Bloomington is a predominantly white, well-educated community. West Bloomington suffers from a higher socioeconomic need compared to the rest of the Bloomington Community, meaning much of their specific community in the 61701 zip code is in poverty.

While Green Top Grocery is located within the 61701 area code (shown in Appendix A), they are located on the eastern side of this area code which means they are not located in an accessible location for the majority of the residents that are in poverty: the West Bloomington neighborhood, colloquially called the "West Side." At their location, there are a series of other



small businesses in the complex, including a bike shop with a small local coffee bar inside it, and a high-end children's toy store. Directly outside the cooperative doors are small tables for outdoor seating, and at times, a stand filled with local sprouted plans for home gardens. In the cooperative, the ceilings are tall, with a lofted area with additional seating. Directly left after entering the cooperative are the registers, with the teaching kitchen on the far left. The teaching kitchen, in addition, has seating which is arranged in different ways for events, such as cooking classes or speakers. Local artists' art is featured on the wall. The rows of groceries include sections of produce, bulk, grocery, dairy, meat, deli and prepared foods, frozen, and beer and wine. When looking at governance, Green Top Grocery's board members were solely white women, except for one white male.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### **The Alternative Food Movement: Issues of Neoliberal Ideologies and White Spaces**

The alternative food movement, a social movement emphasizing educating people on ethical food practices, influencing food policy, and increasing localism (Guthman 2008), seeks to disrupt the industrial food system that conventional food producers and retailers profit from. Alternative food practices can include “those who advocate for more ecologically sound and socially just farming methods, food marketing, and distribution and healthier food options across the US,” (Slocum 2007). The alternative food movement emphasizes the concept of food democracy, in which people reclaim power over the creation of food policies and practices. In this way, consumers may move from passivity to being increasingly educated on their consumption habits along with how food policies and practices might affect their daily lives (Hassanein 2003).

Within the Alternative food movement (AFM), many researchers focus on neoliberal initiatives to answer issues related to environmentalism, sustainability, ethics, etc. Critics argue that this method of combatting the conventional, industrial food system might actually reproduce it and further divide individuals socioeconomically and racially (Agyeman and McEntee 2014). Busa and Gardner (2015: 324) state, “despite the radical roots of the alternative food movement, complicity with neoliberalism has become commonplace in the alternative food discourse.” Messages from the AFM often include neoliberal discourses such as “support local farms”, “vote with your fork,” or even “vote with your dollars,” which stresses the importance of buying power when it comes to the kind of food that is produced and sold. These messages are considered “market-based methods” of addressing the food system (Alkon 2007, Agyeman and McEntee 2014, Clendenning et al. 2015, Hughes 2010, Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011, Jung and Newman

2014, Koenig and Lo 2017, Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017). Alkon (2012) describes how messages of “voting with your dollars” contribute to inequality within the AFM because consumers with more money have more “votes”, leading to more influence. Therefore, if we rely on a “voting with your dollars” mentality, disenfranchised communities such as low-income individuals or people of color likely won’t have as much influence in AFM discourse. Within the neoliberal framework the AFM pushes for “green economies” by green activities directly in contrast with anticapitalistic histories, where participants in the AFM sought alternative methods, like food cooperatives, to combat the industrial food system (Alkon 2012). While some believe that everyday consumption habits equate to movement participation, most critics believe that individual consumption habits do not equate to genuine participation within the AFM (Busa and Gardner 2015).

The Alternative Food Movement is often considered exclusionary in regard to race and ethnicity. Researchers argue that the Alternative Food Movement is coded as a white space (Agyeman and McEntee 2014; Burdick 2014). Alkon and McCullen (2010) describe how the AFM engages in both white discourse and practices. The emphasis on whiteness within the AFM can decrease participation of people of color, thus making it more difficult for the AFM to address issues of inequality. Institutions within the AFM, such as food cooperatives, farmer’s markets, etc., are often considered white spaces because of both the demographics of consumers engaging with these institutions but also cultural codes within these institutions (Alkon 2014, Guthman 2008 Hughes 2010, Jung and Newman 2014, Turje 2012, Holt-Gimenez Wang 2011). As the alternative food movement is coded as a white movement, cultural assumptions are imbedded, creating a precedent of white consumerism as the most morally sound. Decisions based on “good” food are made by white people within the movement and then perpetuated

through non-profits spreading what they believe is a healthy lifestyle to low-income people of color (Clendenning et al. 2015; Hughes 2010; Turje 2012). This creates a racialization of poor people of color as irresponsible eaters with a need for education from white leaders in the alternative food movement (Turje 2012). Additionally, Guthman (2008) finds that the AFM gives little attention to the privileges experienced by those interacting with alternative food institutions. She finds that community food movements aren't focusing on addressing white privilege likely because of the invisibility of whiteness. Moreover, those in the AFM are resistant to addressing white privilege or engaging with anti-racism practices because of the possibility of excluding those already engaging with the AFM – white people. Within these institutions, Guthman (2008) also finds that white people are more likely to stick together within institutions in the AFM, creating exclusionary practices. She states that successful alternative food institutions (AFIs) that attempt to address racial equity find it difficult to maintain diverse demographics of participants, meaning at times they find it necessary to exclude well-meaning white people from participating.

Burdick (2014) describes alternative food initiatives such as food cooperatives and farmers markets as “white countercultural projects” or “white middle-class projects.” Pedagogically, the AFM experiences problems in which they embrace an “if only they knew” mentality. Educators often feel that if they could express the benefits of the AFM and practices, individuals would more likely change their habits. This is true of white non-profits who are given authority on food related projects. In this case, their ideas and methods are presumed as best for all involved, including POC and other communities they're educating. This further perpetuates white privilege within the AFM (Burdick 2014, Dixon 2014). Further, Dixon (2014) argues for how this practice might remove the identities of those they're trying to assist through changing

diets or asking for participation with alternative food practices in which the participants fail or struggle to meet the demands of those practices. Burdick (2014) argues that the AFM's pedagogical strategies suffer from other problems such as attempts to invite others to the table and create more diversity where diversity initiatives are considered an afterthought or superficially made. Likely, there is still a sense of white privilege or white-coded practices in these instances.

Within popular discourse, but especially in AFM discourse, American agriculture is often whitewashed (Burdick 2014). White farm imagery is romanticized, where a white nuclear family on an organic farm is heralded as the ideal and what consumers strive to support. Notions of racism and discrimination of many groups in US history are often neglected or forgotten through this practice, such as Native Americans, Asian immigrants, Mexican field laborers and farmers, enslaved black people, etc. We forget about these groups in the desired American agriculture imagery now because white people are the only people able to achieve these ideals (Alkon and McCullen 2010). Further, individuals shape the space in agriculture and environments. Humans create landscapes that adhere to culturally coded notions of beauty and other values. Racially, this may create different ideals of what American agriculture can and should look like. Whitened cultural practices and notions of landscape and environment are currently the romanticized ideal in this manner (Alkon and McCullen 2010; Guthman 2008).

AFIs commonly pander to affluent consumers, often because products offered at such institutions are considered luxury or environmentally sustainable (organic, fair trade, local, etc.) making them more expensive (Guthman 2008). Jonason (2017) describes the various barriers for low income persons (LIPs) to participating in alternative food institutions such as organizational barriers, cultural barriers, economic barriers, social barriers, and cognitive or physical barriers.

Barriers of participation in AFIs for LIPs based on organization include location, hours of operation, convenience, quality of produce, and organizational policies (such as if they offer food assistance programs). Cultural barriers also present a problem for participation of LIPs in AFIs, in which consumers of color may feel that their racial or ethnic identity is incompatible with consuming from white institutions. Consumers of color may feel that culturally appropriate foods are not offered as well. Low engagement of consumers of color often leads to individuals at the AFIs advocating for educational programs arguing for the “if only they knew” stances. Economic barriers include high prices and not enough disposable income. LIP’s perception of AFI’s is often that they’re expensive or elitist in comparison to conventional grocery stores. Social barriers for LIP engagement are that those who are well-connected are more likely to participate in AFIs, specifically because AFIs are comprised of a more closed network. Additionally, POC often feel they do not belong or are not trusted, specifically regarding vendors at farmer’s markets. Cognitive and physical barriers include that LIP lack awareness of AFIs or that they have limited abilities to participate with AFIs (Jonason 2017). Despite this base of knowledge and data about participation by low income persons, Jonason (2017) notes the need for more research on low income people who do not participate in alternative food institutions.

The AFM often attempts to address food deserts and urban areas that lack access to fruits, veggies, and other healthy, nutritional food products. These areas tend to have increased access to highly processed foods, snack foods, and fast food items, often due to redlining, making it more difficult to sustain businesses in those areas (Guthman 2008). AFIs advocate for health food stores or food cooperatives in these areas. Guthman (2008: 433) found that despite this interest, black residents in these areas desire convenient access to conventional grocery stores instead. Consumers of color have the desire to shop in a space that provides them anonymity and

normality that white people often take for granted in their access to conventional grocery stores. Guthman (2008) calls for a shift in the AFM from addressing particular qualities of food and food products themselves to addressing injustices and disparities in food access for all.

### **Food justice and Food Sovereignty as Alternatives to the Alternative Food Movement**

In contrast to the alternative food movement, the food justice movement views the food system as a racist institution (Agyeman and McEntee 2014, Alkon and Agyeman 2011). The alternative food movement actively participates in the conventional food system, specifically regarding neoliberal frameworks for food access, despite its desire for resistance. Because of this and a lack of participation in social justice issues, the food justice movement rejects much of what the alternative food movement stands for and practices. Food justice seeks to address structural issues in the food system by acknowledging how issues of power and inequality shape people's experiences of food and access to food in the US (Alkon 2007; Billings and Cabbil 2011; DePasquale et al. 2018; Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011; Hughes 2010; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Jung and Newman 2014). Food justice expressly seeks to address the issues stated above surrounding race and class, looking to attend to the structural injustices faced by individuals in our food system (Alkon 2007; Alkon 2014; Clendenning et al. 2015; Emery et al. 2013; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011). Food justice has its origins during the 1960s with the Black Panther party during the Civil Rights Movement. They created the first free breakfast program in the US to combat rampant poverty and hunger for poor children of color (Alkon 2007; Curran and Gonzalez 2011; Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011; Jung and Newman 2014). Food justice, usually framed as addressing structural issues surrounding food, race, and class, has also been described as addressing these issues through community-based solutions rather than larger political ambitions (DePasquale et al. 2018). Methods of resistance in food

justice can range, but common themes include worker-owned cooperatives, collective action approaches, and urban agriculture. Regarding food justice campaigns, if food justice initiatives were to receive aid from conventional food companies or industries or use similar exchange practices with an emphasis on capitalistic values, then they are argued to be not actively seeking alternative routes but instead are adhering to the current systems values (Agyeman and McEntee 2014). Further, Agyeman and McEntee (2014) argue that food justice is actively seeking to undermine the commodity fetishism that is a fundamental quality of big food businesses.

Slocum (2007) illuminates the ways in which whiteness, specifically in the alternative food movement, may create symbolic boundaries and artificial (and physical) distance from other racial groups. She explains how places like health food stores, food cooperatives, upscale food markets, and farmers markets can be white spaces and may build a closed space, keeping out others from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Alkon and McCullen, for example, explain how farmer's markets are often assumed to be reflective of the greater community that they reside in. Alkon and McCullen (2010: 947) state,

*Because customers in our market sites assume the market community to be proxy for the surrounding city community, the market creates a community imaginary where the subjects are white, affluent and happy with food system alternatives, and potentially blinded from seeing food system problems experienced by others.*

If people of color are not represented in these spaces or excluded, their issues related to food might be forgotten. Racial and class-based divisions between groups are then ignored, furthering an image of white affluence, comfort in their localized system, and ignoring the groups that are not in attendance (Alkon and McCullen 2010).



Critics of the Food justice movements in the US argue that gender is often left out of the equation. Food justice has historically focused solely on race and class issues within the industrial food system. By not recognizing the structural inequalities affecting women in the industrial food system, food justice fails to recognize the intersectional nature of addressing the food system, especially when considering low income women of color (Castellano 2016; Hughes 2010; Patel-Campillo and Sachs 2014). Food work and issues surrounding food and food access have been historically gendered as female problems, creating the narrative that women may have the first shift of taking care of the home, second shift of working, and a third shift of taking care of a preparing food for the home, along with making food decisions for the family (Castellano 2016; Patel-Campillo and Sachs 2014). Food justice efforts should seek to reframe “food work” as a non-gendered, creating a new narrative of food work as something to be pursued by men as well (Castellano 2016; Hughes 2010; Patel-Campillo and Sachs 2014).

These issues of food can be extended to the alternative food movement including food justice movements, where the division of labor in such movements has been stereotyped through historical divisions of labor, men in leadership, women gardening, cooking, and making decisions around food and eating (Castellano 2016; Hughes 2010; Patel-Campillo and Sachs 2014). When asked about why women participate in food movements, men believed their reasoning to be because they’re more community-oriented and communicative while women believed that it was their “cultural default mode” (Hughes 2010). Inconsistent data also exists surrounding the participation levels of women in alternative food movements including food justice. Some studies have stated that women are better represented in these movements while others say the opposite (Hughes 2010). This creates problems in the food justice movement in

which women may not feel represented or heard, though this is categorized as their domain, possibly having a higher stake in the game.

Food sovereignty has been presented as an alternative to food justice. Food sovereignty, successful in South and Central America through La Via Campesina, is defined through gaining autonomy of the means of production, particularly land and markets, in the food system and maintaining that autonomy through eventual governmental support. While usually a local movement in action, food sovereignty has become an international cause, with more and more localities seeking to reclaim their own autonomous means of production (of food) (Clendenning et al. 2015). Supporters of food sovereignty claim it as a more rights-based approach than food justice with a focus on food producers, against the corporatized, neoliberal food system (Clendenning et al. 2015, Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011). Food sovereignty, unlike food justice, seeks only to address the means of production as a way to combat the system, believing that taking back these means will create individual autonomy for localities dealing with corporatization or globalization. Additionally, food sovereignty addresses issues of workers' rights, specifically regarding food production rights, while food justice movements often fail to address these issues, looking more at food access (Alkon 2014).

Though some support food sovereignty as an important step for food justice movements in the US, there are critiques believing that the term "food sovereignty" in the US has become a white concept, though its inception was in Central and South America. People of color, especially leaders in the food justice movement, may not have heard of this concept in low-income communities or are doing their own form of food sovereignty under a different name or no name altogether (Clendenning et al. 2015, Holt-Gimenez and Wang 2011). Other critics state that the food justice movement seeks to incorporate governmental and policy change but through

different means, that of inequalities in race and class, while food sovereignty seeks to take back the means of production. Food sovereignty movements often lack a racial component engaging in government resistance, especially in Central and South America, leading to different structural issues facing those in the US (Clendenning et al. 2015).

Moreover, literature has suggested that the food justice movement may want to work within the neoliberal framework of the industrial food system to find hidden strengths within possible suggested initiatives. This critique stems from the belief that by ignoring market-based approaches to addressing the industrial food system, we might hide possibilities of change (Alkon and Figueroa 2017; Harris 2009). It's also suggested that by further perpetuating neoliberalism as the enemy, we reify its existence as a hegemonic structure, leading to less possibility for change (Harris 2009). Other research suggests that if we reconceptualize what food justice consists of, including market-based approaches, it's possible that this could support the collective cause overarchingly, even if approaches may fall in a neoliberal framework (Alkon 2014, DuPuis et al. 2011). A call for reflexive food justice is made that would create a more inclusive food justice movement to include differing definitions of what constitutes food justice (DuPuis et al. 2011). This, in turn, create a more cohesive, inclusive food justice movement to further the cause with greater participation and representation Although the food justice movement, can improve their participation and inclusivity in their movement, the alternative food movement, specifically alternative food institutions continue to struggle with these issues, and cooperatives are no exception.

### **Food Cooperatives as Potential Democratic Alternatives to the Corporate Food System**

The International Co-operative Alliance or ICA describes a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social,

and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (Oz and Aksoy 2019). Cooperatives usually adhere to values of “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity” (Dakurah, Goddard, and Osuteye 2005). Food cooperatives are viewed as an alternative way to achieve a sustainable food system because they undermine conventional, hegemonic food structures and the relationships to them that maintain the status quo (Denali 2013). Most cooperatives have commitments to the community they reside in through various methods (Jochowitz 2001; McCahan 2018). Today, cooperatives operate organizationally similar to conventional grocery stores but most still have aspects of their missions committed to issues of the first food cooperatives, such as community empowerment and economic democracy (Haedicke 2012).

Food cooperatives in the US originated in the 1960s when young people in countercultures wanted to pursue environmental sustainability and had an increased interest in nutrition (Sommer 1984). Historically, they wanted to disrupt big businesses as the main purveyor of the food supply. Food cooperatives, initially viewed as alternative, found difficulty when larger food companies laid their stakes in organic farming, buying up small organic farms in the 1990s to sell more organic and natural food items via the conventional/corporate food models. Food cooperatives then had to work harder to keep customers, especially since they did not have a niche market for organic and natural foods anymore (Haedicke 2014). Earlier cooperatives focused on providing low priced food through buying wholesale while new wave food cooperatives sought to sell local and organic produce. It was the latter of these cooperatives that popularized organic food (Oz and Aksoy 2019). New wave food cooperatives also emphasized “leftist social movement tendencies” as opposed to earlier cooperatives (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). After losing both their low prices and unique access to natural and

organic food products, food cooperatives sought to capitalize on affluent consumers' hedonistic pleasures related to purchasing food in order to compete with conventional competitors and high-end natural food stores like Whole Foods Market.

The primary difference between conventional grocery stores and food cooperatives is through democratic ownership, in which the members of the food cooperative have stakes in the success of the cooperative and jointly make decisions for it. The goal is not to make a profit but rather satisfy the needs of cooperative members by providing a service. Originally, food cooperatives operated as “democratic businesses” in which members would both shop at the store but also work volunteer shifts to keep the store running. Members would vote on store policies as well. Oz and Aksoy (2019) describe how when food cooperatives use volunteer membership programs, this can create bonds between the members, further creating connection to the food cooperative because of the collective nature of the organization. They describe this as the “co-op” spirit. Though this is the case, the democratic process took up significant time (Haedicke 2014).

Food cooperatives moved away from member labor, incorporating conventional business practices of labor employment instead (Haedicke 2012). Literature suggests that member-based labor for food cooperatives can often act as an exclusionary practice. It might divide cooperative consumers, excluding those who cannot participate due to a lack of time. Further, with member pricing rather than labor, those with the economic advantages might be able to shop at the cooperatives more so than those without the economic means to do so. Therefore, either model may exclude disadvantaged or low-income people regardless (Haedicke 2012). Zitcer (2015) describes how member labor programs might solidify the cooperative's community through shared experiences, though it could exclude lower income people and single parents who have a

lack of disposable time. Meanwhile, it might also keep prices lower which could make the cooperative's organizational structure more inclusive in that way.

Today, food cooperatives commonly have members vote for the board of directors or have them run for positions themselves. Furthermore, having members own part of the food cooperative, receive discounts and dividend checks, is a new way for the food cooperatives to demonstrate the original democratic values of the original cooperatives. Members at the cooperative democratically vote on goals of the food cooperative, as many cooperatives engage in political and social justice issues mostly related to food justice or the food system (Haedicke 2014). Some of the goals or values that food cooperatives typically support include localism, sustainability, organic agriculture, fair-trade, among others. Food cooperatives stock products that reflect these values, including local products (Moncure and Burbach 2013).

Food cooperatives are primarily conceptualized in two different ways, both the association of members and the business. From a business perspective, members are seen as consumers in which the cooperative will provide goods and services to those consumers. When board members or owners of the food cooperative use this framework, the organization is less likely to have open communication and high participation levels, with more emphasis on neoliberal business aspects (Dakurah, Goddard, and Ostuye 2005). This is especially true of those who are in leadership positions within the cooperative. In this way, food cooperatives may suffer from vastly different objectives from other cooperatives, and within the cooperative itself. Leaders of the cooperative will often assume that most members agree with their points of view and objectives, leading to less outreach to the general membership base regarding their opinions, interests, and objectives. Members, then, may feel passive or not heard by the food cooperative

as an organization, leading to dissatisfaction, low membership commitment, low participation, and ultimately a collapse of the cooperative itself (Dakurah, Goddard, and Osuteye 2005).

Hansen, Morrow, and Batista (2002) found that members who had “affective trust” for other members, trust based on feelings or senses, would more likely feel positively about the expectations of the food cooperative. They also found that the two important factors in determining this, though, were how complex the services provided were and locations of members in relation to the facility. Therefore, though affective trust played a part in positive expectations of the food cooperative, this depended on complexity of services and geographic dispersion of the cooperative and its members.

Food cooperatives, though intended to provide services and goods related to the consumption of food, can often act as social organizations where people can interact with others about topics important to their own identities. As is often the case with food cooperatives, the desire to live sustainably or adhere to other values important to food cooperatives can lead to members feeling like a part of a community (Moncure and Burbach 2013). Because of the emphasis on specific values or morals, when members feel they are doing something right or are pursuing a similar interest, this can also reinforce not only the collective nature of the group but also the attitudes within the group (Sommer 1984). Moreover, Hale and Carolan (2018: 115) describe other ways in which the group (a food cooperative) is further driven by collective action. They state,

*In other words, the desire for respect and social standing can lead individuals toward collective. If an individual’s motivations include concern for the group, that person gains status. The greater the status obtained, the more influence an individual receive in the direction of cooperation. This can lead to groups bifurcating over time into free-riders*

*and high contributor subgroups with contributors becoming more central to decision-making.*

In addition, legitimation of social identity and further creating a sense of belonging can be an important tool for the pursuit of success for a food cooperative (Moncure and Burbach 2013), so long as they understand how this creation of social belonging might exclude others. Zitcer (2015) found that though food cooperatives may foster a sense of community for some (in his case, the queer community), this member solidarity or community might exclude other groups simultaneously (for him, people of color).

Historically, food cooperatives mostly emphasized the financial benefits that members could receive when shopping at them (Sommer 1984). Though this was once the case, today members are usually not price conscious. In fact, members of food cooperatives are now more likely to pay high prices for food that adheres to their values, like localism, sustainability, and organic products (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). In fact, many of these values are attached to the likelihood of consumers supporting food cooperatives. Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan (2017) found that members of food cooperatives were more likely to sacrifice financially to support their local cooperative. Members were likely to prefer local food compared to nonmembers, paying more for these products. Buying local was also found to be more important than buying organic to members. In comparison, they found that nonmembers that regularly shopped organically were more likely to be conscious of financial values and would shop at multiple locations to find the lowest prices. They were not as engaged socially with the missions related to the cooperative. Otherwise, members of the cooperatives found that the social engagement aspect of the organization was essential to their shopping experiences. Members were more interested than nonmembers in creating relationships with others and wanted to engage more



with locally owned stores where people knew them. Overall, the found that what differentiated the members of a cooperative versus nonmembers in terms of consumption were price, choices available, and convenience. Though this was the case, people who shopped at natural food stores were seemingly the same consumers are those who shopped at food cooperatives (Streed, Cliquet and Kagan 2017).

A strong predictor of shopping at a food cooperative is altruistic values, meaning consumers were more likely to want to make a community impact through their consumption or participation with an organization such as a cooperative (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). Moncure and Burbach (2013) found that environmentally conscious consumer patterns were related to interrelated identity amongst consumers. Further, Willis and Schor (2012) found that conscious consumption as such was related to political action. Though this was the case, a reduction in consumerism and green consumerism (as such is the case with consumers of a food cooperative) were equally related to political action and activism.

Sommer (1984:74) describes how cooperatives are “economic units organized to fulfill social purposes” where those two values, the social and economic, come into conflict often. Therefore, successful cooperatives find themselves reinvesting in both the community side of the organization but also the economic side. Focus needs to be divided equally for cooperatives to find success. If a cooperative does not do this, then there is an increased likelihood of the cooperative closing. This may be due to not enough financial capital or inability to adapt when other conventional or natural food stores enter into their market, challenging their customer base (McCahan 2018). Cooperatives may face competition from natural food stores and conventional grocery stores, not from new cooperatives (Haedicke 2014; McCahan 2018). Haedicke (2014) argues that it is possible that due to challenges like this to the market, cooperatives may have to

disregard their founding missions in order to face the competition of big food business. Even when food cooperatives offer shortened distribution circuits as a niche selling point to potential consumers, large natural grocers like Whole Foods Market, are starting to do the same (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). Food cooperatives and other natural food stores also find difficulty because of their reputations for being expensive, elitist, and less convenient than conventional grocery stores (Moncure and Burbach 2013). Cooperatives, then, must adapt creatively to their consumer bases expectations in order to compete with the conventional grocery stores.

Regardless of this, consumers still expect cooperatives to operate similarly to conventional grocery stores and also aesthetically present the same as well (Haedicke 2014).

Going forward, cooperatives have to resist relationships based on capitalist rationality as well as naïve egalitarian decision making, with disregard for the inequalities faced by populations that could be potential consumers or members. This, in turn, could create more diversity in resources, membership, and practice. If members of a cooperative do not intentionally pursue cooperation, the cooperatives then might resort to traditional economic rationality and business practice, regardless of if they continue to identify as a cooperative or not. Ultimately, cooperatives will more likely succeed in creating more just food systems in the future if they focus on both the organizational and social aspects of food cooperatives (Hale and Carolan (2018).

### **Local Food Movements as Indicators of Status and Racial Exclusion**

Researchers struggle to agree on a distinct definition of what is considered “local” (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid 2004). Local food and organic food are often conflated when not educated about the topic, though local food is often considered healthier or more nutritious (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). Commonly, there is an apparent distinction between what is

considered geographically local versus culturally local that confounds this definition (Hobart 2016). Local food systems can follow two distinct frameworks: either that regional food must be protected and promoted along with the traditional methods of producing those food products or that both producers and consumers must participate in localized food systems as a means to reject the industrial food system. Local food systems reside in both, being both geographically and socially constructed. Specifically, local food systems are based on both socio-historical contexts and cultural contexts. These contexts in turn influence the kinds of food that are both produced and consumed within a given area and also who consumes them (Denali 2013). Localism, then, could be considered a way of placemaking within the community, through shared cultural and socio-historic identities (Hobart 2016). Local food can also strengthen community activity through increased interaction between members of the community, producers of food products, and consumers of this food. It can also bridge the gap between rural and urban communities, through rural producers selling to urban consumers. This may create more social capital within the community due to increased social cohesion surrounding the localized food system (Denali 2013).

The local food movement and localized food systems have become the trendy movement in food and agriculture after organic food has been overtaken by industrial agriculture and conventional food stores (Busa and Gardner 2015). According to Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan (2017), local food shoppers prefer to shop locally because it both supports the local economy but also because local food feels “fresher” compared to organic or conventional food products. Meanwhile, Zepeda and Leviten-Reid (2004) found that consumers strongly supported local food production and growth efforts but had difficulty creating a cohesive description of what that meant. Nevertheless, they found that consumers positive views of local food production were

that this may enhance the local economy, as seen by Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan (2017), but also that it would create a positive environmental impact. Though this was the case, they also found that enthusiasm for local food and food production was only seen in cases where the consumer could see or receive direct benefits from their support (Zepeda and Leviten-Reid 2004). Busa and Gardner (2015) found that interest in buying local food was rather connected to personal concerns than any sort of political, social, or environmental implications, though some did put emphasis on the win-win scenario in which consumers would both receive something they enjoyed while also contributing to a moral or political cause. Local food consumers are typically typified as being educated, of the middle class or affluent, and white. Typically, they also reside in metro areas or in college towns (Alkon 2013). Local food consumers more likely are concerned with the environment or community involvement than other kinds of consumers (Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan 2017). Those who support local food are more likely to describe the food they prefer as both of nature and human labor, recognizing the human effort and labor that goes into the production of those food products (Alkon 2013).

A common critique of the local food movement is that the local food is a neoliberal answer to larger societal problems. Specifically, buying local is more of a “practice of consumer conversation” rather than addressing the policy issues related to the industrial food system. Busa and Gardner (2015) argue that this kind of action, “practice of consumer conversion”, may lead to moral judgements of individual consumer habits rather than acknowledging and addressing issues within the movement and the values associated, such as environmental sustainability, social and racial justice, access, etc. Further, they feel that emphasizing personal choice in consumer habits for the local food movement means embracing neoliberalism as a political action, thus limiting the political possibilities for the movement. Because of the neoliberal

methodology within the local food movement, people who are low income are more likely excluded from participating or gaining any benefit from consuming these local food products (Denali 2013).

Researchers have also critiqued the local food movement for its failure to address racial inequity in the movement. The movement is often considered racialized and exclusive to white people (Busa and Gardner 2015, Hobart 2016). Local food systems are considered white spaces, with specific producers and consumers benefiting from the system. The people excluded from this system are typically marginalized consumers such as people of color or low-income people who then do not have control over aspects of the local food system (Denali 2013). Guthman (2008: 436) describes localism as being “defensive, xenophobic and impervious to uneven development, as if all communities would want to stay as they are.” She describes how local food movements emphasize the idea of “if only people knew where their food came from,” an idea that can be described as colonial, seeking to improve while simultaneously disregarding historical or cultural distinctions because of the whiteness of the movement.

Alkon (2013) finds that supporters of local food are unlikely to see “nature” within processed and industrial food, thus turning to localized food. They create alternative foodways distinct from industrial foodways to actively criticize industrial agriculture. By doing so, supporters of local food do not see the human labor associated with the production of food within industrial foodways, thus removing workers’ rights and conditions from any sort of social, political, or environmental goals they may seek to address. Additionally, we see white culture within local food movement and agricultural discourse, virtually excluding any conversation regarding violent colonial history within the US. Lack of offerings of culturally appropriate food and an emphasis of white language and ideas from the upper- and middle-class majority also

contribute to exclusion of marginalized communities, where the ideas shared within the local food movement are not expressive of other worldviews. In this way, local food systems fail to address social or racial justice, and do not seek to remedy inequities faces by marginalized populations (Denali 2013). Denali (2013) goes on to describe how the differences seen within local food are problematic for the movement as those wishing to support local food must possess “right” values, asserting morality as a gatekeeping device. This creates further social divide between those able to participate in localized food (white people) and those kept out (marginalized communities, people of color).

### **The Role of Status and Food Through Displays of Cultural Capital and Ethical Consumption**

Bourdieu defines status in relation to context, where “good taste” is associated with more cultural or economic resources. Veblen states that what we consume is directly related to how we seek status. Scholars argue that status distinctions lead to social inequality, and this is where we might find that hierarchy and boundaries are constructed to differentiate between groups (Kennedy and Horne 2019). Patterns of consumption are formed through cultural capital. Ethical consumption, then, can create moral boundaries and hierarchies. This kind of consumption may determine people’s shopping patterns, distinguishing between economically privileged customers that shop at high capital grocery stores (such as Whole Foods Market) versus discount grocery stores (like Aldi) (Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018).

Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston (2018) illustrate that cultural capital is how we might further create symbolic boundaries between people. Tastes of high-status individuals, then, are likely associated with “culinary sophistication and moral considerations,” meaning that what they consume must adhere to both aesthetic and ethical values. They describe the term “eco

habitus” as “a high status and specifically ethical orientation toward consumption that privileges environmental protection and social justice” (2). Therefore, food choices help to delineate boundaries and distinction between groups. Alkon and McCullen (2010) discuss a similar idea, but regarding the liberal habitus of whiteness where individuals may express comfort for luxury products but are then considered liberal regarding social issues such as environmentalism and cultural diversity. They’re able to express this because of privilege relating to social location and values. Omnivorousness is one way in which this occurs, being “the deterioration of a strict cultural homology where high-status consumers exclusively appreciate highbrow things, like opera’ in general climate of Omnivorousness, cultural elites seamlessly blend low-brow and high-status consumption” (Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018: 4). In this manner, they describe how high-status foodies will participate in low status food consumption to express Omnivorousness. (Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018).

Kennedy and Horne (2019) found that people anticipate receiving status for participating in sustainable practices or “going green.” They found that both political parties, liberals and conservatives, give status to sustainable consumption because of its association with affluence. Though this is the case, conservatives were more likely to associate sustainable consumption with morality. Both liberals and conservatives felt that sustainable consumption is considered in higher regard than reducing how much you consume altogether. Gilg, Barr, and Ford (2005) found that those who participated in sustainable consumption were older individuals, homeowners, likely democrats, and members of community groups. However, they also found evidence of them being young, female, educated, liberal, and wealthy. In contrast, they found that those who weren’t sustainable consumers were likely younger, male, had lower incomes, less education, likely less involved in the community, and did not care about politics. Alkon

(2012) also found that connections to environmentalism were more likely to be found with affluent and white communities because of the premiums associated with consuming sustainable or green products and services.

Regarding the consumption of food, Slocum (2007) found that those involved in alternative food movements tended to be economically and socially middle class. Those who consumed organic food originally desired to do so because of political, environmental, or social action, but today, organic consumers feel organic food displays status but also portrays them as the ethical consumer (Haedicke 2014). In a study by Alkon (2012) where she looked at predominantly white versus predominantly black farmers markets, she found that predominantly white farmers markets likely emphasized environmental concerns while black farmers markets were more likely to pursue racial inequality and identity as their major social issue concerns. In this manner, there is a distinct difference in how the two groups pursue sustainability. The neighborhood demographics also affect how each farmer's market is perceived, where the white farmers markets typically have white cultural coding, affluence, making an upscale white space that pursues Eurocentric foodways as the norm (Alkon 2012). Alkon (2012) also found that consumers of white farmers markets were unlikely to pay additional money to support black farmers or racial justice (specifically in West Oakland, CA), meaning that affluent, white communities were more likely to support localism within their own communities than addressing the inequalities between communities.

While the literature demonstrated here informs my research broadly about issues of alternative food movements versus food justice and food sovereignty, understanding food cooperatives, local food movements and status related to food and consumption, this research seeks to fill a gap in the literature in these areas. While some research has been done on status



and food, overarchingly limited research has been done on the role of food cooperatives in this status seeking related to ethical consumption. Furthermore, a lack of research more broadly on food cooperatives means my research can add to that area of study. While case studies have been done in understanding food cooperatives related to inclusion and on more organizational and management understandings, case studies have not been conducted on the roles different groups' perceptions play in understanding a lack of participation with food cooperatives, especially when looking at issues of race and whiteness. Furthermore, this research addresses as specific cooperative, Green Top Grocery, who faces struggles in the Bloomington Community, adding an applied element to this study, as Green Top Grocery can practically benefit from the data obtained.

### CHAPTER III: DESIGN AND METHODS

For this research study, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with three different samples to provide a greater understanding of perceptions of cooperatives, specifically Green Top Grocery. I also conducted observations to provide a contextual understanding of Green Top Grocery and provide the reader with a clear picture of the circumstances. These methods formed a case study where lived experiences of the West Bloomington residents are described through a complex snapshot of their perspectives (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 104).

Marshall and Rossman (2016: 19) describe how case studies “favor intensity and depth as well as exploring the case and the context.” By utilizing multi-methods, one may think depth is substituted for breadth, but by using non-participant observation as background for the interviews, this data can aid in the interpretation of the interviews. Rossman and Rallis (2003: 105) state,

*Because of their particularistic focus, case studies are an “especially good design for practical problems – for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice.”*

By presenting the data as a case study, I am able to develop a deeper understanding as to why Green Top may be underutilized as a primary grocer by low-income residents and expand on knowledge related to status and food related consumption. In creating this kind of study, the case study is not generalizable to the broader population, but by “reason by analogy” (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 105), lessons can be learned from the case study which may be applied to other contexts.

## **Non-Participant Observation**

The second data gathering tool I used was non-participant observations, employed prior to interviews, but also throughout. By observing the physical space of Green Top Grocery and how people may act when in the space, I gained a point of reference when interviewing people about their perceptions of Green Top Grocery. Non-participant observation, as opposed to participant observation, were used because the research setting and patterns of action within Green Top Grocery itself were the main source of data rather than interactions between consumers at the cooperative (Given 2008).

I observed Green Top Grocery on various days of the week and at different times of the day. These occurred both before interviews, after interviews, and on days in which there was no interview. Because the non-participant observation I conducted was in a public space, consent was not required for this phase of data collection. I had no interaction with people within the cooperative during the time of observations, (except those interviewed) but instead I conducted observations of the space, noting key aspects such as what it looks like, how people interact with the staff and the space, the kinds of foods sold, among other visual observations. When looking at interactions, I avoided listening to or collecting data on specific conversations but instead looked at nonverbal behavior such as posture, facial expressions, and eye contact and movement. The observations I conducted were covert, with minimal field notes taken within the cooperative. Instead, notes on the observations were made once I had left the cooperative, in a private setting. Field notes were taken extensively, providing “thick description” as described by Geertz (1973) and further explained by Rossman and Rallis (2003: 197). By using covert observation, people using Green Top Grocery were more likely engage in typical activity and were less likely to alter any of their actions. Moreover, the observations I made were in a typical setting within the

cooperative (Williams 2008). Therefore, no observations were conducted post-stay-at-home order in Illinois due to Covid-19.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The second, and most robust, tool for data collection and analyses was semi-structured interviews. The data from the non-participant observation was used to inform the semi-structured interviews with key informants. I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with three separate sample groups: Green Top Grocery Leadership (including board members and employees), Local Food Access Experts (including individuals working for local non-profits), and self-identified West Bloomington residents. I utilized semi structured interviews in contrast to structured interviews to allow the interviews to be framed more as a conversation, allowing the participant to tell their story more fully (Marshall and Rossman 2016: 150). Having reviewed literature relating to food justice, food access, and food cooperatives, sensitizing topics were used to create interview questions. Of this, Rossman and Rallis (2003: 181) explain,

*The researcher identifies a few broad topics (perhaps framed as questions) to help uncover the participants meaning or perspective but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses.*

Data was collected in a manner that respects the narrative of the participant and gives justice to their lived experiences, furthering the understanding of peoples' perceptions about food cooperatives.

### **Sampling**

When conducting data collection, the first step of the process was finding informants from the three respective samples. To achieve this, I used a snowball sampling method, otherwise known as a chain sampling method, where a key informant was identified who lead to

other potential informants based on criteria of eligibility (Given 2008). Since it is difficult initially to identify people from the West Bloomington neighborhood that have an opinion they'd like to share about Green Top Grocery, finding one key informant to identify others provided more potential participants than I would have otherwise been able to achieve through other sampling procedures.

I identified key informants by contacting Green Top Grocery board members and identified local food access experts. I then asked key informants to share the names of others in their networks that they believe had opinions about Green Top. Using a snowball sampling methodology, after each interview, I asked informants if they know someone who would be willing to be interviewed about this topic. With snowball sampling, there was bias because those who aren't connected to the key informant(s) do not have the chance to partake in an interview (Given 2008). However, by asking key informants to specifically identify people of diverse backgrounds who have opinions about Green Top Grocery, it was possible to reduce this bias.

Participants were interviewed separately to help prevent any biased answers and to ensure that the most accurate data for that individual is collected, as respondents were not influenced by other respondents' responses. The interviews I conducted were audio recorded and transcribed. I took limited notes during the interview as to maintain comfortability of the participant and ease the flow of the conversation, but occasionally, few key notes were jotted down to inform notetaking post-interview. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants. They were not be conducted in a place convenient for me to avoid making the participant uncomfortable. The questions I asked of respondents were phrased to allow for the greatest depth of information from the participant, however the

questions did not use leading language or lead participants to a biased answer (Ayres 2008). See Appendix B for the question guide.

A total of 13 respondents were interviewed, representing 3 different sample groups: Green Top Grocery Board Members and Leadership (n=5), Local Food Access Experts (n=4), and West Bloomington Residents (n=4). Of those interviewed, 9 were women and 4 were men. The Green Top Board members and leadership were Cassandra, Briana, Meghan, Katie, and Shannon. All these respondents were white women. Cassandra and Briana were involved with Green Top Grocery longer than Meghan, Katie, and Shannon. All these respondents were board members except for Meghan, who was a Green Top Grocery employee. Of the local food access experts, two respondents were white women and two respondents were men (one white and one self-identified Latino). This group consists of Tara, Clare, Rick and Curtis. Tara works at a local non-profit organization that provides food access while Clare has various professional pursuits related to addressing food access and is a Green Top Grocery owner. Rick is an educator who is knowledgeable on food access within the Bloomington community. Curtis is employed at a local non-profit that provides food access, among addressing other social needs. Both Rick and Curtis are Green Top Grocery owners as well. Of the West Bloomington Residents, two women (one white and one self-identified Latina), and two men (one white and one self-identified black) were interviewed. Cheryl is between jobs currently and had moved back to West Bloomington after living elsewhere for several years. Gabbie is a local activist within the Bloomington community, and has lived in West Bloomington for several years after graduating college in the area. Richard is also a local activist within the Bloomington community who has various professional pursuits and a longtime West Bloomington resident. Finally, George is a local artist who has lived in West Bloomington for much of his life and is a Green Top Grocery owner.

The methods employed, semi-structured interviews and observations, provided me with the most detailed and feasibly collected data for my study. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I asked questions that helped me gain insightful data on my research topics, especially related to varying understandings of food access, motivations for shopping at grocery stores versus food cooperatives, and the ways in which people's lifestyles influence their perceptions of Green Top Grocery. I conducted interviews with my respective sample groups as they provided me with the most relevant data to answer my research questions. Both the Green Top Grocery and West Bloomington Resident subsamples provided key insights on the differentiation between perceptions of food cooperatives, food access, and the role race plays in formation of perceptions. The Local Food Access Expert subsample aided my understanding of the Bloomington community, as I am relatively new to this area. Their responses did not align solely with the Green Top Grocery sample nor the West Bloomington sample, but rather spanned perceptions. Through interviewing respondents at locations most comfortable to them, I believe respondents were more comfortable in the space, which aided in getting more informative data. All the Green Top Grocery respondents were interviewed in Green Top, meaning they felt most comfortable in that space, while the West Bloomington Residents and Local Food Access Experts subsample were interviewed in a range of locations including a local coffee shop, a local restaurant, their place of work, Meanwhile, the observations conducted both prior to, and during my interview stage of data collection framed much of my understanding of the data from interviews, especially regarding issues of prices, aesthetics, and products offered at the cooperative. Furthermore, these observations aided in my development of research questions, as I was oriented to the cooperative prior to conducting interviews. Holistically, these methods

provided me with a breadth of data that helped me to more fully answer my research questions in the most feasible manner.

### **Ethical Considerations**

During the non-participant observation phase of data collection, I actively avoided listening to private conversations while observing. I only observed the actions and reactions of people that were non-verbal. Because this stage of data collection was done in a public space with no interaction, IRB approval was not needed for this stage of data collection. Only the social surroundings of the food cooperative and nonverbal communications or behaviors were observed. People were not identified at this stage of data collection. Gifts were accepted in any form from Green Top Grocery during the duration of this study.

While in the interview stage of data collection, it was important to develop a certain level of rapport and comfort for the participants, while also maintaining my role as a researcher. Marshall and Rossman (2016: 124) state that “researchers’ respect and caring for participants can, if unguarded, go so far that they lose their ability to separate from personal entanglements.” Therefore, I made sure to emphasize my role as a researcher, not a friend or confidant. Participants’ identities are confidential, and each interviewee has been given pseudonyms for the final report. This information has been stored in a password protected document that I only had access to (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 73). Participants’ responses have not shared with other participants (Rossman and Rallis 2003: 74). Participants have also been asked for their consent to be quoted directly in the final report. No interviews have been done with participants under the age of 18 or from protected populations. Participants signed an informed consent form before the interview starts so that these aspects of the study are made known (See Appendices C, D, and E



for informed consent forms) In addition, pseudonyms have been used in place of each respondents' name to ensure confidentiality.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Based on the thirteen interviews conducted along with supplementary observations, I found several emerging themes that informed this research. Firstly, Green Top Grocery board members overtly expressed the “ends” or values of Green Top Grocery, which included the notion of fairness, the importance of community outreach, education surrounding food consumption, environmental sustainability, and the importance of local goods. All these “ends” inform the way the cooperative is governed and operated. Secondly, I found that Green Top Grocery struggled initially during the planning stages and initial opening stages of Green Top’s life, according to respondents. They stated this was due to involvement with a large national entity that gave them what they thought was bad advice. Green Top suffered from fiscal constraints as well, in addition to employee and management turnover. The third emerging theme was that Green Top Grocery struggled from a poor community reputation, due to reputations like having a lack of effective marketing and branding, expensive ownership and prices, elitism, and financial struggle. Another emerging theme was that West Bloomington respondents believed that they were deceived based on claims to address the West Bloomington food desert through placing the cooperative in the neighborhood, but then failing to do so. Respondents felt this contributed to the poor reputation, as Green Top did not feel welcoming, or grassroots to them, but rather was white space that felt inaccessible for respondents of color. Much of these poor reputations seemed to be connected to differing understandings of food access and different motivations for shopping at cooperatives versus conventional grocery stores, the two next emerging themes. Green Top Grocery Board members and West Bloomington Resident respondents differed in both areas, with Green Top Grocery board members emphasizing traditional food access models, while West Bloomington Resident respondents emphasized food

justices and food sovereignty. Finally, Green Top Grocery Board members and West Bloomington Resident respondents differed on what they saw for the future of Green Top Grocery. While the Green Top Grocery board members envisioned financial stability and expansion to future locations and modalities, West Bloomington Resident respondents described the ways in which Green Top Grocery must reconcile with the West Bloomington neighborhood, hoping they'd reimagine their structure, relook at who's in positions of power, and acknowledging their mistakes.

### **Understanding Green Top Grocery's "Ends" as Guiding Governance and Operations**

Green Top Grocery's mission statement includes a series of "ends" which are values that they abide by as a cooperative, both through their store operations and through their membership and board. The following quote outlines these ends,

*Because Green Top Grocery Exists:*

- *the community is committed to cooperative values and directly supports the local economy with access to healthy food.*
- *the community has information on how to make the best food choices and understands the impact of those decisions.*
- *farmers and producers benefit from a thriving local agricultural economy.*
- *employees benefit from our employment practices which are a model for good jobs everywhere.<sup>1</sup>*

These ends are what guide their decision-making processes as a store. Employees of Green Top consider the ends when conducting day-to-day tasks and serve the purpose to keep the general manager on track regarding these values, specifically with products they carry.

*All of what we do is based off of those mission end statements. So even thinking about bringing in different products are working with a particular organization, I have to consider the ends because the ends are basically the owners' goals for the store that the board of directors have given me to utilize to filter through information and tactics and so forth.-Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*You know, and that and that it's committed to, you know, working with farmers and, you know, get those ends, keep us, keep us honest. You know, they, they keep it from becoming, you know, even if the board wasn't at all involved in, you know, looking at the*

<sup>1</sup> <https://greentopgrocery.com/ends-mission/>

*kinds of products we're carrying or something, those ends should keep any GM, you know, in, kind of in line, so to speak. -Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

The board members also have to abide by the ends and remind themselves of the importance of these through recitation at the start of each board meeting, according to two respondents. One of the purposes of reciting these ends at the beginning of board meetings is to simply to help board members feel present and on task for their duties. Additionally, these ends can serve to align board members and store employees on their goal as a cooperative in what they plan to achieve.

*Yeah, so we read this, the beginning of every board meeting, just as a reminder of what you know, kind of what we're committed to, you know, and and, you know, there's that there's the sort of the way that they're written and then kind of the bottom line. So the bottom line of employment, like making sure that this is a good place to work. We, you know, it's it was important to the organizers that this be a good job, you know that the job had good benefits, that we're competitive, but it's also just a place that you would want to work.-Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*They serve multiple purposes. It grounds us at more meetings when we do that. It was the idea of one of our former presidents to ring a bell. And everybody just kind of forget what else you're thinking about today. We're here. We're talking about Green Top. This is what we're here for. And then, you know, employees can use them as their mission statements. Every company has a mission statement. Now those are ours. You know, that's what we this is what we hope to accomplish. And this is what we think about every day when we're making decisions whether that be the store manager or a board member. Make sure that we're all on the same page and know what we're striving for when we, you know, when the store opens every day. – Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

In these ‘ends’, we find a specific emphasis on “fairness” with two respondents. Shannon described the importance of fairness for Green Top as engaging in fair employment practices. Practically, Green Top addresses this end through providing wages above the minimum wage and by providing health insurance.

*Most of the employees I know here are happy to work here. So, I would like to thank we're filling that end and that we pay them a fair wage, and they're getting insurance that they can afford. And that covers them well. So, I mean, one of them and I think the most controversial is the one about treating workers fairly and paying \$15 an hour or whatever the state minimum wages that is not in our control, but if that's what the state minimum wage is then that's what at least our people should be making. You know, I know that was a controversial topic and some*

*people agree with it, some people don't but either way, you know, it's the right thing to do. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Cassandra looked at fairness in much broader terms, describing that fairness stretches beyond Green Top to the owners, consumers, and Bloomington-wide community.

*Um, I think I would characterize it. One word, fairness, right? Fairness to farmers, fairness, the staff, fairness in the community, fairness in the work that we do and the people we do it for. The whole notion of one owner, one boat, that's fairness. The richer you are, the longer you've been an owner doesn't make you more powerful. One vote. To me, that's fairness and then extending that out. It's fairness to the workers who produce the food, fairness to, honestly, the environment. So, to me, that's what this is. This is the great leveler. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Meghan and Katie described the importance of supporting the community for Green Top. They emphasized that helping people, for Green Top, is a major value reflected in their practices, such as their commitments to supporting local producers and farmers, their “round up” program (in which consumers can “round up” their bill to the higher dollar amount and donated the change to a cause), and other forms of donations.

*It's community owned. It's helping people supporting people. It's developing people. And there's so many different facets that this particular business covers. It's just all around just a benefit for the community as a whole. And if we were to close like tomorrow, it would not just impact the staff, it would also impact the owners, it would impact the people that we sell their products of. It also would impact over like 12, even beyond that, not-for-profit organizations that struggle to gain funding. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*So connecting people with us, with local people is one [role] and education would be another and then the last other like big role that I feel that makes this different than like, say going to a chain grocery store is the charitable contributions that we do specifically to local places...It's not just a grocery store. I feel like in this community in particular, it's a great like bridge between vendors and the community. – Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Cassandra and Katie both felt that education is an important value for Green Top. Cassandra believed teaching people about food is important to Green Top’s mission.

*I think our role - it's still, I mean, still provide food and access for this general area and the bulk of our shoppers are within like a one-mile radius. Um, but I think it's also - and I*

*think we do this pretty well with things, the educational programs, I think it's to teach people the importance of what food is. It's not just like, like plate to mouth. It starts much earlier than that. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Katie agreed that Green Top engages in education regarding food, but also regarding sustainable lifestyles, like zero-waste.

*I think another big role that like people don't realize is like, I view this place as like an education spotlight. We're always educating people on like, what's in season or how to store stuff or how to recycle things or be less waste, like Zero Waste people. Of course, we have the cooking classes. I don't know what else do we do for education. I mean, education wise, like it's just insane the array of the stuff that you can learn from some aspect of the store. – Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Other themes mentioned regarding Green Top Grocery's ends and values include environmental sustainability described by Katie and locally produced food and goods described by Shannon.

Katie explained the various sustainability initiatives Green Top Grocery engages in. She explained that for Green Top, in her view, it's simply a given to incorporate environmentally sustainability.

*That's one of the values that I love about Green Top is that it is a place for like I don't feel weird, bringing my own stuff. I bring in my own mesh bags for produce and stuff like we've never used plastic bags for that. And that sort of thing. So yeah, I say environment and people are the two things that like two values from Green Top that pop, like that really stand out to me... This last March was our first MOO [Meeting...] that we attended, and they handed out they had the report for the year. And it talked about like, how many gallons of water was saved by like, the way we built it or like, how much... for me a big thing for this store is that they compost like, I love that they compost stuff from the deli... I love that it's just incorporated in the store that things are more green than they need to be like. So, you know, they don't like brag about it like, Well, this was made from recycled stuff where these windows are like energy efficient or whatever. It's just kind of a given. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member.*

Shannon concisely explained that ultimately Green Top's goal for the store is to source locally grown and produced food for the community. For her, the importance of supporting local is beyond just supporting our local community or educating people on where their food comes from, but rather harking back to her statements on the fair treatment of workers, not just in their own cooperative.

*And as far as you know, sourcing things local, it's easier than people think. And then and I know that sometimes they just assume that cost is the, you know, end all, be all, get all or the ultimate goal of a store. But we factor in other things, you know, are really our only goal isn't to make money... We want to pay farmers what they deserve, what they deserve for the things that they produce, because they work hard. – Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

For Green Top Grocery board members and the single employee, the values serve not just to help guide their store buying and operations, but also inform their practices beyond that. Board members respectively cite the importance of fairness for all parties, including employees, owners, consumers, farmers, producers, and the community at large, the importance for community outreach and assistance including charitable donations, the importance of education in areas related to food consumption and beyond, the importance of environmental sustainability in their store operations and through consumption, and finally, the importance of supporting locally produced and farmed goods. These values, some beyond the stated “ends,” are what inform Green Top Grocery board members and the employee in their statements and practices.

### **Effects of Rational Constraints and Corporatized Models During Stages of Development**

Green Top opened its doors in 2017 after over 5 years of planning.<sup>2</sup> The planning process included several meetings with initial creators, described by two respondents, Cassandra and Briana. The planning process included small, private meetings with these key stakeholders, which they called their steering committee, their first public community meeting, selling shares at the local farmer’s market in downtown Bloomington, and attending national cooperative conferences among other initiatives. Their first public meeting was on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at Heartland Community College. While Cassandra displayed evident excitement surrounding the planning process, Briana expressed her initial apprehension towards the idea of a cooperative. With previous experience with other cooperatives, her initial perception framed Green Top as a

<sup>2</sup> <https://greentopgrocery.com/our-story/>



threat to other local businesses like a long-standing natural health-foods store located in Downtown Bloomington, however, her fears were dissuaded by local farmers expressing their support for the cooperative.

*. And the four of us met in a room in the library, and she said, "What about a food coop?" So, I've been there from the very beginning, I didn't know what it was then, a co-op. But since that point, you know, I, literally have been involved in every single phase of this entire project...But our first community meeting like where we said, hey, we want to do this thing, what do you, the community, think? And like 100 plus people showed up. It was amazing. And some people didn't know what a co-op was. Some people did. But we had this huge meeting, and the room was pretty much like yes, this is amazing. We should do this. Okay. So that was March of 2012. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*You know, I knew about Green Top getting started. I was at the very first kind of organizational meeting out at Heartland. I was excited, but also a little bit skeptical... I had lived in Urbana, and I was a member and still am a member of the Common Ground [Coop] in Urbana [Illinois, located 50 miles SE of Bloomington]. And I think at the time, I saw Common Ground, because it's big, I saw it as being largely another grocery store. Like I don't know how much at the time that I first heard about Green Top, I don't know how much they were buying from local farms. Now, they might have been buying a ton. But my impression of the store was that it was it was a kind of local grocery store that had a lot of health foods. And so, I think my first thought when it started organizing was, boy, is it going to drive Common Ground downtown here out of business? Because it's going to be a bigger kind of a bigger operation. And can... is it going to just be another grocery store...But the more that I heard farmers who are interested in being owners, and the one of the large farms in the area was one of the kind of driving forces initially and you know, owner number one, and I think that it turned me around a little bit and the more that the development started happening, the more people kind of talking about what they would want in the store... What really got me was hearing the farmers say at that first organizational meeting, listen, we've expanded, we've created a couple at that point, it was just a couple hoop houses. We have the capacity to grow a lot of these things year-round. But we have to know that there's a place to sell it. And there wasn't, there isn't a year-round farmers market. So now there are winter markets. Back then when they were first talking about organizing the store, it was May to October and then maybe one holiday market in the winter. So, if they were going to grow this stuff in the winter, they didn't have any place to sell it and yet, they knew that they would hear from customers that people wanted to buy it. – Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

After the initial planning stages, Cassandra explained at length their experience with national cooperative conferences which led to their involvement with National Co+Op Grocers (NCG), a cooperative of food cooperatives in which these cooperatives are provided with many resources



including bulk buying of natural foods from United Natural Foods I? (UNFI). While Cassandra was the only respondent to explain Green Top Grocery's relationship with NCG in detail, her story bears important insights into their tumultuous initial stages. In addition to their relationship with NCG, Cassandra also explained the role of a consultant in their early decision-making processes as well. Cassandra explained that they participated in conferences early in their planning stages which led them to meeting national consulting groups for cooperatives, leading to their participation, rather than observation, in conferences, including workshops, and winning awards. Cassandra explained their award winning at the conference at greater length.

*And then later on when we had our owner loan campaign, which we broke records. We're the first co-op to raise 1.5 million from our ownership nationally, ever.... Well then, the conference wants to have the award winners come and talk about how you, you know, the struggles and how you got there. So, we did.... – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

After their participation in cooperative conferences, Green Top Grocery struggled with turnover in their general manager position, as their first general manager, though Cassandra said did help build the cooperative in the beginning, was unable to grow sales, suffered from “missteps,” and decided to leave. She explained that then Green Top hired an interim general manager and described his role.

*[Regarding their General Management Turnover] So, the interim comes in, and his whole job was to basically fix all the things that were not done right by the first GM, but also by this national group...*

At this point in the interview, Cassandra told me about their experience with NCG, and what she perceived as poor advice and consulting on their behalf. She explained their role as an organization, in increasing cooperatives' buying power, supplying groceries from UNFI, and that many cooperatives are part of this organization. She then explained to me how important she feels being part of NCG is to their business model.

*And so, you desperately want to be part of that club. Because as an independent grocery store, you simply cannot get prices that you need to be able to sell it for a cost that people aren't going to poop themselves over.... -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

She expanded to discuss how Green Top became part of their development cooperative model, in which NCG handpicks cooperatives they want to assist during their development and planning stages.

*[Regarding their role as an NCG Development Cooperative] So they have this early stage thing that they handpick who they want to help, and they handpicked us. We're going to help you and so, but kind of the mixed blessing is, but in order to help you, you have to do everything we say. And our theory right now, this is them talking, our theory right now is that the most efficient way to open a successful store is to follow our template. And our template dictates the colors on your walls. It dictates the fonts that you use, it dictates the messaging that you do, and it prioritizes these certain things. And this is from this organization, this organization and we said that sucks and they said like it or lump it. Either you're part of us, you do what we say or you can choose not to be a part of us and good luck to you. - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

In this, Cassandra explained how she felt their program was controlling, in that cooperatives that were part of this program were required to follow specific templates, including general marketing templates that could be applied to many cooperatives. To her, she thought that NCG's mentality was framed as either, you follow our templated advice, or you leave this program.

Seemingly, Cassandra felt Green Top must participate in this program despite this because of NCG's influence in the cooperative community.

*Well, so we felt like that really our only choice was to kind of make this, what we knew was a problematic bargain.... We had to give up control of a lot of things about our store as far as the decisions. So, when the store finally opened, there were these sort of like, very, I don't want, I don't know what to say like it was bland. If you ever, if you go back and you look at photos of our store, it was bland. It was, I don't know how to describe it. It looked like a daycare. And then also, there was no messaging around the community. So, like, now we have things like farmer profiles, and they have this big map about who we are. And we've got like, all these things that are about like, oh, we like we and us and the people behind the stuff. Well, all of that was deemed not important... - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Harkening back to the general, templated marketing, Cassandra felt it was bland, and explained that now, they have more messaging surrounding marketing the local community, including producers and farmers. She perceived NCG as not focusing on that, lending to a notion of a corporatized cooperative model, feeling “bland” as she called it, and less about the community.

She expanded more surrounding NCG’s influence on their cooperative, through her explanation of their pricing decisions. She stated that GTG was influenced to price things through general pricing models provided by NCG, thus further limiting their ability to be competitive in the local community. This included high pricing for bulk products and irrational buying of certain bulk goods, like many kinds of flour. She also mentions their perceived high prices of milk, a perception Cassandra felt lives on.

*Like, so it was - it was like everybody was just like eh. And it's - it's a lot more strategic than that, you know? We, they set everything in a flat margin. Well, you can't do that like mark - milk has a lower margin because it's a very price conscious type of product. Everyone knows what milk costs. Well, ours didn't cost that because some were just like well, times it by two, there you go. And you're like, well, that's not going to work... - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

She goes on to explain that NCG did not emphasize ownership, and therefore staff members stopped talking about becoming an owner. To her, this seemed to make the community believe they do not need them anymore. Therefore, they did not get new owners at this time, meaning less capital going into the cooperative and paying off their business loans. Cassandra told me that because of this, NCG left them in what she thought was a poor state.

*And they kind of left us with this sort of stumbling staggering, we're going to be out of money in eight months kind of store. And, but at least when they were gone... - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Post participation with NCG, Cassandra told of this that Green Top had to reorganize themselves, calling mentor consultants, building new marketing plans, new messaging and branding, along with an increased emphasis on interior aesthetic. They also had meetings for

owners to announce the changes they were going through, their fiscal struggle, and asked them to increase their consumption at the cooperative. They also had to recapitalize at this time, looking to owners for owner loans, and sending out emails letting owners know that major turnaround was needed in order to keep Green Top Grocery open.

*[Cassandra framing the conversation towards owners] We're on the teetering edge. We need you all to kind of pull up your big girl panties and you know, start showing up and start buying and start telling your friends and all those things that we used to do before we were store. We gotta do them all over again... -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member.*

This narrative from Cassandra is important because it frames much of the respondent's perceptions of Green Top Grocery, referencing the high pricing, which has had lasting effects on their reputation in the community, as well as their difficulty in marketing themselves as a cooperative, and in gaining ownership. This program through NCG also emphasized a corporatized way to plan and organize a cooperative, including generic marketing plans, that are likely followed by many other cooperatives, lending to a lack of a natural, grassroots, community effort, but instead is driven by consulting and perceived "best practices" through this national organization. While Cassandra expressed her experience with NCG and the initial planning stages involving them through this narrative, Briana simply stated the importance of participating with NCG, emphasizing much like Cassandra the importance of the bulk buying power for affordable prices for customers.

*We get this this logo comes from NCG, the national Co-Op grocery and so one of the benefits of belonging to their organization is that we get we get like the discount flyers and the coupons so we can send those out they will send those out to our to the surrounding area.- Briana, Green Top Board Member*

Noting of this time in which Green Top Grocery was struggling, Curtis, a local food access expert and Green Top Grocery Owner, explained that to him, this was a scary time for those

involved with Green Top because of the financial and organizational insecurity, as they did not have enough financial capital from the beginning, with higher debts than they could manage.

*I think that was really scary for a lot of people who were involved. So, there was a big layoff and then like the employees switched around so that, that's changed things as well.*  
– Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner

While a significant number of respondents did not discuss the planning stages of Green Top Grocery at length, the respondents who did describe the planning stages, especially Cassandra, provided formative information that help to frame an understanding of the community reputation, with many of the perceptions of Green Top Grocery linking back the narratives described above.

### **Negative Perceptions as Potential Indicators of Financial and Reputational Struggle**

Because of many decisions Green Top leadership made during their initial planning stages, their reputation in the community seemed to suffer, as described by both board members and employees of Green Top and by members of the community. Three distinct themes emerged across all populations relative to their perceptions about Green Top as a store: 1) Green Top struggles with the marketing of their cooperative to the general community including definitions of what a food cooperative is; 2) they are viewed as an elitist institution with expensive products; 3) they appear to be financially struggling so much so that they might not survive as a business.

#### *Marketing*

Several respondents, despite the differentiation between the respective samples, seemed to have consistent perceptions about Green Top Grocery's marketing efforts. Briana felt that their name hasn't been well-established yet in the community, but that this kind of name-recognition will take time.

*Where do I think we are? I still don't think that our name is out there anywhere near enough, but I think it just takes time, you know, it takes time you can't saturate when I mean it will cost a lot of money to saturate...I think I think it takes time, I think unless you*

*have, unless you have a very, very experienced, very savvy person who's done this before. I think it's really difficult. It just, it's just going to take, the more people know, the more they can tell, the more they can get.- Briana, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Two respondents, Meghan and Briana, argued that conventional forms of marketing like newspaper ad or commercials might create more attention. Meghan discussed the different strategies she's considered as an employee of the cooperative, including newspaper ads targeted at specific neighborhoods and being in the local newspaper. Briana talked about how Green Top Grocery has also recently filmed a commercial to be played on local television.

*Are we really reaching everyone that we are trying to reach? I'm looking at that type of information right now. So, is our message going out clearly about what we what we carry and what we do here? I don't think so. I think we've only scratched the surface with, I guess, general advertising. we've started to do mailers and things like that to homes but that was to a targeted neighborhood. And I feel like being in the local newspaper would be really important. – Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*So, you know, like recently they filmed a commercial...you know, filmed in the store using somebody local, who, you know, is starting a business of doing these, you know, kind of short, short video projects. So, getting that out will help I think they were - they're looking at billboards. So that seems to be the thing that gets really gets a lot of attention on Veterans, maybe on the way into town, those kinds of things. Boy, Facebook, word of mouth is really important. – Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Two other respondents, Shannon and Curtis, described how marketing is crucial for Green Top to gain increased community support, however both express concern that Green Top has not been able to reach certain targeted populations.

*You want a lot of different people shop in your store, but like that's a lot of people that you have to draw to bring over. So, it's like marketing is gonna be huge. – Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*I think we're on the bus route from ISU and so, hopefully, you know, we reached out to them a little bit more because I don't think some of them know that we have like a 10% discount for students on certain days during the week, and... I really wish we did a better job reaching out to students. They would - we would get more of them there. I think it's a very untapped resource. – Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Respondents also felt that Green Top struggled to differentiate themselves from other grocery stores. Cassandra, along with Rick, a local food access expert and Green Top Grocery owner,

and Rick a West Bloomington resident, all expressed concern that Green Top Grocery does not differentiate itself as a cooperative compared to conventional grocery stores like Fresh Thyme, and natural/health food stores like Common Ground.

*We have not done a good job of differentiating ourselves. So, grocery store equals grocery store equals grocery store. And we have not done a good job of saying, this is why what we're doing matters. We're terrible at it. And it's not just us. Co-ops all over struggle with it. Humans need to categorize things in their brain. And so, when you say we're opening a food co-op, go grocery, and then those the rules that you must play by. Well, we don't play by those rules either because we simply cannot or they're shitty rules. So, we do a bad job of messaging that. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member I know of people, you know, and that's, that's an issue for Green Top and others because there is, I think, a demand for this, but whether or not people can differentiate, because I know of people you know, or I go I shop local, I shop Fresh Thyme. It's like, no you don't. You're not shopping local. That's not farmer, I mean that they're, yes, they're farmers, but there's somewhere else and they're probably not small. -Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*They need to somehow distinguish themselves from their competition which saying you sell local produce, other places do that, particularly Common Ground. And we have farmers market where we get those same exact suppliers. And in the wintertime, you know, it's just root vegetables at the moment. That's the problem with living in Central Illinois. They say that they offer organic produce food, so do lots of other people. They say that they offer sustainable foods and stuff, so do a lot of other people. they say they have local suppliers for coffee and stuff, we're sitting in one of those suppliers [Coffehound]. I just don't see what it is that they have that really sets them apart. -George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Another narrative related to marketing was that community members struggle to understand that you do not have to be a member of Green Top in order to shop there, an opinion exclusively discussed by Shannon. Shannon described in detail that it is not necessary to be an owner, but rather owners would just receive different perks or discounts than the average consumer coming to shop at Green Top.

*We've been saying from the beginning that anyone could shop here and we're still fighting that image that, like, you have to be a member or something like that. You can be an owner. You don't have to be an owner of a shop here. Owners get benefits and perks for shopping here. But if you absolutely just don't understand the concept or don't believe in it or whatever, you can still come in here and buy something, buy whatever you want, basically. it's just there's certain sales that apply to owners and some that don't. And*



*there's certain perks that apply to owners and some that don't, but anybody can shop here. You know, you don't have to be you don't have to belong to Hy-Vee's clubs to go in there and shop, but obviously there's benefits to that...I think I wish people knew that everybody could shop here.... I would say just keep coming people in the store, get more people sign up, make more people aware that we're here and that you don't have to be an owner to shop here if you don't want to and keep, keep signing up and doing business with more local producers too. - Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

As shown above, according to respondents representing all three samples, Green Top Grocery may struggle in branding themselves to the community. To the respondents, they felt that beyond conducting traditional marketing practices like commercials and newspaper ads, Green Top Grocery struggles to target specific populations who are not being reached and finds itself lacking any clear differentiation from conventional grocery stores and natural/health food stores. Further, to one respondent, she believed consumers struggled to understand if they have to be a member or not to shop there, another point in which Green Top may struggle to provide a clear differentiation from other grocery stores.

#### *Elitism and Expensive Prices*

The second common theme referred to the perception that Green Top is viewed as an elitist institution with expensive products that are priced higher than the average grocery store. Three respondents specifically discussed the perception that Green Top has higher prices than conventional grocery stores. Two of the respondents specifically cited initial missteps with pricing upon first opening, mentioning “\$7-dollar milk” – a reputation that they believe follows them still.

*We're still we're still working against early misperceptions of, and early perceptions. So there were, there were prices that were just off in the beginning there were there were milk prices that were too high without having a lower price option. I think that was true for kind of lots of staples, butter, milk, eggs, bread, lots of those things where there wasn't a more reasonable option. And even the even the prices that were at the higher end were too high, you know, those should have come down. And it was just that sort of, you know, there are just missteps in opening any, any new business. And so that was, so we're still fighting that. So, you'll still hear people talk about the \$7.00 bottle of milk or*



*something. Because there's they still people still have that. – Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*We continue to this day to battle the reputation because we opened with - with prices that were ridiculous. And so, if you talk to people around here now, they'll still be like, Oh, it's expensive. I don't go there. It's too expensive. And you're like, actually, we have better prices on some things than some of the big box stores. And but you know, first impressions, holy crap. It'll take us a decade to overcome. Because people came - there, they saw, you know, a \$7.00-gallon milk and they're like, never. And then they told 10 friends and we got this terrible reputation and so we fixed it. Obviously, we fixed it... Now we're better on some things but we still have this reputation of being this boutique-y little gentrification, you know, kind of bullshit thing and, and it's too bad. You know, it's too bad. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*Some people would, would think that it's not going to be worth their time to come out of their way to come here. But I think, again, goes along with the assumption that our prices are going to be higher than someone else's. – Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

This perception is further echoed by Gabbie, a West Bloomington resident and Mexican woman, where she critiqued Green Top for their high buy in from the beginning. To Gabbie, before Green Top even had a physical store, they were asking for larger sums of money for ownership than people from West Bloomington could afford, creating a West Bloomington perception of expensive prices and buy in for membership.

*Like it was like a required money to buy into the idea. So, the people who felt most invested started to be growingly this money or more money group of people, like you have to have a certain level of income to be able to be in a cooperative owner at Green Top and I think so. So that just started becoming the rep that I got, Right?- Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

Shannon and Briana both described how they feel the public perceives them as “elitist,” though they both express resistance to this perception. Briana also felt that beyond their “elitist” reputation, she saw their perception connected to the political left, however she makes clear that she believed the Green Top Grocery ownership is much more diverse than that.

*I think just promoting it more in the community and letting people know that we're not just, you know, snobby health food store or like really expensive health food store because it's not the most expensive store in town for everything. Some people just assume that because there's no other green top grocery anywhere else, so obviously, you know,*

*they must carry...some people think that we carry weird stuff and it's not weird. It's just not what you see in the store.- Shannon*

*So, I think, I think i think there's still the misperception that it's just this lefty communist hippy dippy, you know, a natural food store, and that everything's really expensive, but I think that's the most common one. You know, and we're, I think we're a relatively diverse group, I think if you talk to owners. You know, like in the owners' [Facebook] group, you'll find it's, it's more diverse certainly from that misperception. It's, you know, I'm sure there's, there's always going to be some truth in the idea that a co-op is a little hippy dippy, but I mean, yes, we're going to carry Kombucha like, there are going to be people who are owners of the co-op expect you to carry kombucha like yeah, you know, and lots of those kinds of things. You know, vegetarian friendly things, gluten, gluten free, friendly things...I would just like us to I would like our image in the community to change as far as you know, being really expensive, fancy grocery store. It's not that fancy. I mean, we could you know, I mean paint colors are just to make the audience a little bit warmer and you know, but we, you know, hand write signs, make our own make soup every day for people that come in and stuff like that. You know, you can special order stuff if you want to, by the case. – Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

However, George, a West Bloomington resident and Green Top Grocery owner, and Gabbie, a West Bloomington resident, both expressed that they do feel Green Top has an elitist feel to it. Gabbie goes as far to express that she felt it seemed “gentrify-ey” – a perception that is upsetting to Cassandra, as expressed in a quote above. Gabbie also linked her perception to both class and race, believing that Green Top Grocery is for upper-middle class white people.

*And the reason I didn't is because when it started, it had this very elitist feel to it...Bottom line is it doesn't have a food co-op feel to me it has this kind of shi-shi millennial thing that I just I find off putting...The whole thing has this kind of elitist thing that I just found at odds with what should be the spirit of to me a food coop is. I mean the most people that I know...I think a lot of people shared my feeling was weirdly "that ain't no co op" kind of thing. – George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*It just has this very chic, gentrify-ey kind of feeling. It's for a different class of people, or a different race of people like from its inception, and it's in part probably because of the people leading the project, That's their identities, right? so it's like, unconsciously, like as a person who really studies race deeply, It's everything you touch, right?- Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

While Green Top Grocery board members realize that Green Top struggles from these perceptions, they seemed quick to defend regarding any such statements, providing their

reasoning as to why Green Top shouldn't be perceived as having high prices or feeling "elitist." In contrast, West Bloomington residents such as George and Gabbie also address the same perceptions that Green Top Grocery board members list, believing these perceptions of both being expensive and elitist as true.

### *Financial Struggle*

The third theme revolves around the perception that Green Top appears to be financially struggling so much so that they might not survive as a business. Five respondents cited that Green Top Grocery may not be doing well financially. Both Rick and George expressed discontent regarding their decision making during the planning process due to fiscal concerns. Both felt that Green Top wasted money, and thus created the debt they're in today.

*I have heard Inklings from other folks that maybe it's not doing so well right now. That they're, you know, very challenged with the direction of you know, how they're going to continue to go or how they want to proceed – Gail, Local Food Access Expert*  
*I mean, it's - it's not... even the mainstream, the most profitable, you know, they're- they're operating on really thin margins, and so there's not a lot of room for error and a startup to get your - your initial sort of operational debt and things as low as possible for me would have been a bigger priority. And I think that that's something that that, you know, is hampering it. I mean, they are getting to the point where it is operationally sustainable right now, but whether or not they can ever manage to pay back those huge loans is... that's the real troublesome part...I have always been a little bit, I think, that that some of the planning wasn't necessarily as as foresighted as it could have been. They have a huge chunk of debt that is - is troublesome. And it's actually one of the reasons we didn't do an owner loan in the first round, but then as you probably know, they did a second round. – Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*I'm not saying that they're making a lot of money. I don't think they are. It's just they wasted so much money, on the set up a place that they'll never get out of debt and the only reason they got on was because a lot of wealthy members of the community said okay, I'll put down another 20-grand. I don't think those owner loans will ever get paid off. – George*

*Well, to be honest I don't think they'll last. I just don't think financially they can. – Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

Cassandra addressed these issues and did not see this as a sign of future failure, stating that community members didn't understand why loans were being asked for from owners by the Green Top board.

*It's hard that no one gets the notion of why we were asking our owners to put in loans. No one gets that which is a must be a failing on our part, right? – Cassandra*

While Cassandra, in her perception as a Green Top Board member, felt that these loans aren't indicative of failure financially, Gail, Rick, George and Richard all agreed that there is a perception of financial struggle, especially since Green Top asked for loans.

### **Broken Promises to West Bloomington: Issues of Location, Aesthetics, and White Spaces**

In addition to the community perceptions described in the previous section, another prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was a critique of the location of Green Top and their stated intent to address low-income and diverse populations regarding food access. This perception was shared by all the West Bloomington respondents. West Bloomington respondents did not find the location of GTG acceptable for addressing food accessibility in West Bloomington nor do they feel it would address the food desert in West Bloomington like they claimed it would. Rick, Richard, and Gabbie explicitly stated their concerns regarding Green Top's claims of addressing food access in West Bloomington. Curtis discussed, in relation to Rick and Richard's concerns, how he expressed these concerns early on in the planning process.

*They wasted, in my humble opinion, 80-grand on a study to tell them that there were indeed food deserts in Bloomington, Illinois. We already knew that, and we knew where they were. They talked a lot about helping the west side and helping ISU students and stuff neither of which they did when they put that store there. I think the biggest criticism I got was that they were gonna help the food desert on the west side. Obviously, they didn't. Yes, there was a bus stop there. But even that's not that convenient and that's not how people shop, you know? They don't. It doesn't answer the needs and that whole you can use food stamps here and stuff. It's just it's a fudgey, make you feel bad about being poor kind of way, I think. -Rick, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*The one thing about Green Top Grocery that I cannot agree with them on is the perception about what the what the grocery store was about, the model, the business model, what needs it was going to meet during the development stages and how they garnered the buy in for the project. Basically, using research about the food desert that exists in West Bloomington, the community miles away from where they actually built the grocery store. I'm not, you know, in a position where I'm in opposition to them in any way. But the truth of the matter is that those things and that doesn't go away. And they're yet to acknowledge that they basically duped the people and you know, told people one thing and did another and they're yet to acknowledge that they have a moral responsibility to correct the wrongs and actually do what they said they were going to do. -Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

*I think part of my views are also colored by the fact that I feel like part of they pitched to people was that they cared about the west side and that they were going to address the food issues on the west side. And then I don't think that that like materialized. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

*It was me and one other person like I just remember communicating to them a few of the things that like are going to be critical like one being, you have to make sure people know where you are because your location isn't inclusive for all the people that have the veterans Parkway, you know, grocery stores, there's 10 of them. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

In addition, Richard expanded on the critique that Green Top utilized West Bloomington data for their own gain. He explained further that they didn't use data from the location they are actually located in to mobilize community members to buy into their project, implying that community members felt misled or "duped".

*So basically, they used many, many years of research, statistics, feasibility studies, all of these things pertaining to food access and food inaccess, inaccessibility and information around the food desert that exists in West Bloomington. They used all this data that was derived from one community, and they built a grocery store in another community, a community that is predominantly middle class that doesn't really have I guess it could be considered a food desert. But the information and the research and the statistics that they use did not come from that neighbor came from west Bloomington. Those are the facts. There's no hiding from that. There's no there's no combating that. There's no way to you know, go against the facts. So, that's what I mean by they duped people. -Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

*You know, so a lot of people, not me, people who have invested in green top, personally and financially, they feel like they were, you know, kind of misled, you know, in that way, because like I said, the facts are facts, you can't get away from the facts, you know, and that's what I mean by right their wrongs. Because at the end of the day, when you're*

*talking about food access, and food deserts, all of the research, like I said that they came across they read and feasibility studies and all the things that they did to understand how to address that issue does not reflect building a grocery store at the price points that people in a food desert can't, you know, they can't afford. So that's, that's, that's unacceptable in every way. And there's no way around it, there's no explanation for it. Other than, you know, there was two roads to go down, you could either, you know, build this health food store with high price points and organic product. Or you can actually address the food, desert issue and food inaccessibility issue and research how to do that at a price point where people who are affected by that can afford. They chose to take this information that supports this route to garner support and once they got that support, they went in a completely different route and they don't want to admit it or acknowledge it. -Richard, West Bloomington resident*

Another West Bloomington resident, Gabbie, explained her somewhat mixed feelings about Green Top. She noted that although she likes the idea of what they're doing, she also felt that certain decisions, specifically those related to their location, tarnished her perception of Green Top, much in the same way as Richard discussed. Gabbie also expressed frustration about Green Top's marketing, specifically their message in the planning stages to address the West Bloomington food desert. She also expressed her perception that Green Top Grocery may be more for middle-to-upper class white people.

*And I think in part was like because I like intellectually and like the lefty sort of white side of me is like, totally digs what they're doing like conceptually but really just kind of felt like there was a big disconnect in the way that that project like was started, right? Because the conversation and the thing that they were pitching was like hey, there's a food desert right and like West Bloomington is a food desert so everybody like let's come together and do this thing and let's have people own the grocery store. And it's like such a radical, cool concept. But then they sort of ended up like putting it in somewhere that isn't really west Bloomington in my estimation and isn't super accessible to the people in my neighborhood. – Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

*I think the location is a super, super, super, super big deal, right? Because That's more like the historic core of downtown which is where like upper class middle class white people have you know, like, like but it's like people who have expendable income to do that stuff right? I don't think like green top is like uniquely bad or uniquely racist or uniquely fucked up. It's just an extension of like, the town we already live in, which is for white people. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*



Respondents such as Rick and Gabbie agreed that both the aesthetic of Green Top – it’s architecture, interior design, etc. – along with the general “feeling”, seemed to make it a place that feels like it lacks inclusivity for all populations.

*The place has kind of a sterile feel to me. You know, if you go to Champaign with Strawberry Fields or someplace like that, that's a food coop, in my humble opinion. It's a lot of fun to go there. They look great - welcoming and cool, and that's what it should be to me. I was hoping that they would have a place that was a repurposed building instead of building a new building, and I was hoping that they would have a nice outside dining area. I know they have an outside dining area, but it's pretty crappy. And most importantly, I was hoping they'd have a big garden space so that they would grow stuff that they could sell, and you could go see stuff growing there and learn about it and stuff like that. It's just a very sterile building. And I'm surprised at how little originality went into that going and I know the architect, he's a wonderful guy, I'm assuming it was a budget issue, and yes, they have some repurposed wood in there but to me, it looks like that down-market Kroger. -Rick, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*Really clean that it was like well lit, but it was like, like it was attractive. Like it felt almost like being in a Whole Foods, which like, have that kind of appeal right? Yeah, Whole Foods is like very intentionally designed to feel really good about being there. So, like I felt good about being there, but I felt off about being there the same. Their identity is more of what's been done already is which is just like a space of super designed for white people and it's like this is thing that I'm conscious of every space I walk in, like there's not a single other person of color. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

Rick and Gabbie’s critiques were in stark comparison to Cheryl, who explained she does not think about the aesthetic and that it does not prohibit her from shopping there. Rather, she was more concerned with practicality, understanding what is on the shelves, and how to find those grocery items.

*Seems inviting. Um, I don't think about it a lot. Yeah. But it's not off putting...I think in a grocery store I'm much more interested in what I'm going to find on the shelves. And if those are clearly marked. -Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident*

In connection to the aesthetics, such as the store feeling sterile or like a white space, both Rick and Gabbie felt that the store doesn’t feel “grassroots” compared to what they expect from cooperatives. Rick thinks this was due to the planning process, which didn’t feel like an organic community effort, but instead was too intentional. Gabbie agreed, explaining that the leadership

and planning makes Green Top feel less like a grassroots project. In her eyes, the model itself is not compatible with grassroots organizing. She prefaced this to say that she does like food cooperatives, but that it supports a different population altogether.

*I think that we should have done it as an organic crowd sourced effort where we all got together and talked about what we wanted and everybody chipped in a little bit and, and we made it happen instead of doing marketing studies and buying a whole brand new building that was custom built for the purpose. -Rick, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*I'm not sure what the like leadership is, but it's like it doesn't it's not like a grassroots project. It doesn't feel grassroots-ey. So, I just don't even know what the model was like compatible with like a grassroots approach. I like co-ops. I think it's great, but like, it's just, it's gonna serve a different population. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

Curtis echoed this sentiment, believing that internally, i.e. organizationally, Green Top needs more representation from the broader community, as the Green Top Grocery board is comprised solely of white people, mostly white women except one white male. Gabbie later discussed how she felt that Green Top Grocery simply wasn't a place for her, but rather a white space, middle to upper class space, all demographics she does not identify with.

*I think internally, think internally there has to be, it needs to reflect more of broader community. I think, and it's not I mean, it's not just Green Top, it's, there's so many organizations where there needs to be diversity, right? Because if you know if nature is showing us anything, it's like diversity is, is so powerful and so incredible. And it's like, that's the way it's supposed to be. So, when you have any kind of concentration of any one thing, it's like, it's not a great thing, and it's not balanced. So, to have more ideas coming from different areas of like, how can we do this? Like, how can we do this? What, like, what are we focusing so much time and energy on like, maybe we shouldn't like, be thinking so hard in this certain area, like maybe we should back off from that. So, so just whether it be from the board or from the staff or management, it's just like, having diversity within is like super important, very critical because like, no matter what you post or plaster put up, you know, advertisements. What's going to shine through is like, internal. So, when you build that internal component, whether it be a business organization, even a person, like how that reflects out is going to be, you'll see it. So that's kind of why you know that that it needs to be diverse. – Curtis*  
*It feels like - it's a like - it's a space that's built for a different class and a different like, race and a different like a different group of people like that's not a place that I identify as like my grocery store. – Gabbie*



To clarify this, Gabbie explained that her perception of Green Top is based in her personal identification with class and race. To her, she felt she belonged in a different class and race than who she personally knows to shop at Green Top. She described them as middle to upper class white people who are both liberal and socially conscious. In her perspective, they have expendable income, and thus are able to purchase more expensive groceries.

*I mean, I think in part it's like maybe because of the other people that I know that like shop at green top and they're like, mostly like middle and upper class like white people that are like, liberal or like socially conscious, but also have like expendable income to be able to like shop for more expensive groceries. And just like I think green top is just like got this like really like bougie like socially conscious Birkenstock wearing, like white liberal vibe, which is like, cool, but it's just like not a place that I feel like particularly comfortable or that like, speaks to me...But it's just like I never seen I never seen a black person at the Bloomington Farmer's market just like I never seen a black person at green top grocery ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. So, it's like when you don't see that, then you assume like I also do not belong here because I don't see these people. Whereas at the hood Kroger, we're all like, what's up? – Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

She also explained that in addition to feeling like she isn't comfortable or that it's not a space for people of color, she also described Green Top as feeling expensive. She explained that this could be because of the aesthetics of the store, in that it appears appealing and clean (as she described earlier), and therefore she assumes she cannot afford it. She understood that this might be the case, rather than her not actually being able to afford it. She said that despite this perception, it's important because she does not know anyone from her neighborhood or class status that shops at Green Top.

*Like it feels expensive and I don't know why it was expensive. Maybe, maybe it's a psychological thing where it's just like, because it's like, nice. You think like, Oh, I'm not supposed to be here, and I can't afford to be here. You know what I mean? like, I totally fully accept that that's like, could totally be it. But I think like, that's that matters. Yeah. Like, I don't know anybody in my neighborhood or like class status. like, like everybody that like shops at green top is like, I would consider to be...and I think like I'm probably in that rung of the ladder at this point in my career as well. But that's not like sort of where my identity sits. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

She explained that beyond not seeing people of color shopping in the store, she also explained that they don't have people of color on their board. At the time of the study, all Green Top board members were white and all employees that were interviewed for this study were white. She believed the lack of diversity on their board is reflected in the space, as little diversity or feelings of inclusivity have been brought to Green Top, in her eyes. She qualified her statements on Green Top to say that they aren't bad people or a bad organization.

*I don't know if they have any people of color on their board. But like yeah, that's not felt in that space, you know, but that's like that's a space with some intention around bringing like diversity. I don't think they're bad. I just think they are - they are who they are. The people who organized this, the people who are making decisions are who they are, and their fingerprints are all over it. – Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

To Gabbie, Green Top is simply reflective of the people who created it and currently run the cooperative: white middle- and upper-class individuals. This is their identity, which influences the perception of Green Top as a white space through the use of aesthetics and their leadership and decision-making.

In contrast, Green Top board members acknowledge this perception but still think that their location is the best location given the information they garnered from market feasibility studies in order to be successful, as the population surrounding them, mostly white, is more affluent than the West Bloomington neighborhood. Both Cassandra and Briana expressed that location continues to be an issue for Green Top to garner more community support and financial success. In contrast, Meghan, an employee of Green Top, believed that community members are also upset they didn't pick a location in Normal.

*I think there's still the location issue. I think people drive by Washington Street, and they see that this place is here. But unless you're going to go there for some specific reason, I think it's not the kind of place a place where people tend to just pull off and say, Oh, I'm going to stop in there and see what that is. I think that's true of the bike shop too. I think they have... and gingerbread house. I think they all have the same, same issues with getting people in off the street like you've got to turn the side street, or or pull in down at*

*that end in order to get into the parking lot... – Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*People kind of resented the fact that we were trying to solve a food desert problem with our location. The people who focus on the food desert wanted us to be way in the West side. But none of the market feasibility studies showed that as being - we never would have made it and this was as far west as we could go and still lure are customers who had enough income to buy the nicer things, which is fact, you know? And so, we put it where we could, but we can we still catch flack for that. Yeah, so I mean, it's hard. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*And some people were really upset that they didn't have the location in normal. And the I think the whole concept of us being here was to be in that what they consider a food desert because of the type of customer base that's here doesn't have direct accessibility to, you know, transportation. And then there's like how many people you know how many people per households, you know, make X amount of money, and you know, how far away is the next food store and things like that. All that kind of plays into what they consider a food desert. And I really do honestly feel like this area is where it should have been. Maybe not this particular corner on the street but I think they, they did a good job of trying to figure out where they wanted to place it. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Meghan defended Green Top's location in a different way than Cassandra, believing that their location benefits people in West Bloomington, locating relatively closer to that location compared to having a location in Normal. She again stated that their decisions on location were driven by food accessibility, but that maybe this specific corner they're located in is not ideal.

Katie believed that their location should have been in the West Bloomington neighborhood to specifically benefit food access and combat the food desert. However, she made clear that she understands that this location is the best possible option, and that this location is "close enough" to address the food desert. Katie further acknowledged that there would be unique challenges to locating in West Bloomington. To her, large chain businesses have a better chance of success in a lower income neighborhood like West Bloomington because of the financial capital required remain open and successful.

*So, this location is like it would have been better to actually have us in the west side of Bloomington, cause that's like really the food desert. But this I think is like, good, like*

*better than any other location. You know, like if we can't be in Westside Bloomington then this is like close enough, I guess. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*So I just think that like businesses in west side if you're not a chain and you don't have all this money like to back you up already I think as a new brand new like baby business who had to raise capital and didn't have a corporation to back them up like I think this was like the only plausible spot to start. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Katie reiterated that this location is the best option based on their limitations of locations to be financially successful.

Shannon explains that to her, their location is actually optimal for food access because of its accessibility to public transit. She claims she, along with other owners, were able to influence these decisions to locate near a bike trail called the Constitution Trail and to be on a bus route.

*I'm one of the first 500 owners which are considered the founding owners. So, I always tout that.... We got to kind of vote on what we, what we wanted the goals or the location, like what the what kind of characteristics we wanted the location to have as far as, you know, being on the bike trail and we'll get there by bike and being on the bus route for people who, you know, maybe didn't have a car or didn't want to use their car, things like that. So, I always, always try to remember that for some reason... I think they have a stake in the community. And I think they also, you know, they built here, as opposed to further on the east side, because I think it's more accessible here to a wider variety of people. Especially with the bus stop. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Food access experts interviewed also expressed their perceptions on the location of Green Top.

Curtis explained that through his work in the West Bloomington community, he now understood that a lack of access to Green Top is often because of limited access to transportation. This limited access to transportation, such as a car, makes going to Green Top that much more difficult. Lower income people often rely on public transportation, thus needing a bus route that will bring them to their desired location. In addition, Rick, a food access expert and Green Top owner, didn't necessarily agree with Shannon that access to a bus stop provides accessibility to food.

*And something that I have realized more with kind of working in West Bloomington is that not everybody has a car. Which might sound weird, but I think not everybody*

*realizes, like, not everyone has transportation. So how do you get places? Some people ride their bike, they're able to they're physically able to ride their bike everywhere, and they have the capacity to transport a good amount of like food or whatever. So sometimes that works. Otherwise, it's like the Bus. So, where does the bus run? What's the most convenient place to shop on the bus route? So, I mean, it depends where you live, but typically it's, it's going to be a place that's kind of on the edge of town. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*And we see a lot of people in the neighborhood who don't have access to cars. You know, because cars are expensive, and that was actually talking volunteering there since that that opened but it is it's a combination of things. It's just it's a whole group, subset of people, mostly low income, who don't have access to cars and, you know, shopping on a bus or a bicycle is not as easy, you know, as it is for people with cars. -Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

While Green Top Grocery Board members felt that they are, in fact, addressing food access in the West Bloomington neighborhood, or at least that they're attempting to, food access experts and West Bloomington residents alike express their perception that Green Top Grocery is not doing so. Rather, West Bloomington residents in particular express feelings of betrayal with the utilization of West Bloomington data on food insecurity to promote ownership for Green Top Grocery.

### **Differing Definitions of Food Access as Deterrents to Participation with Green Top Grocery**

Interview data illustrated that Green Top board members and employees along with a few food access experts had differing perceptions of what food access is compared to West Bloomington residents. Board members tended to think of food access as SNAP benefits and LINK match, community outreach programs, education, and diversity and inclusion. Meanwhile, West Bloomington residents framed food access in terms of location, accessibility, and affordability.

### *Food Access as SNAP and LINK*

Two local food access experts (both Green Top owners), Rick and Dana, and a Green Top Board member, Katie, discussed how low-income people using SNAP benefits can benefit from their LINK match program. In this program, people who receive SNAP benefits are eligible for vouchers to be used to receive local produce.

*So, if you swipe your snap card for up to \$25, you can get \$25 in vouchers to use here for the local produce.... So, it's up to \$25 per day. So, if you get the \$25 in vouchers, and then you go to use it on local produce. – Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*For every dollar that you spend, they give you a voucher to spend on local products like local produce. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Further, Rick explained that one of Green Top's major goals as a cooperative, in his perspective, is to provide food access for low income individuals.

*I think that it is a big part of the goal of Green Top and I don't know, and they do some things like, like that, I think are pretty important. And I don't know how successful they've been. But like the Link Match, for example, you know, which really goes a long way to sort of or I would imagine would go a long way to making it more accessible, reasonable for folks who really, you know, have to count every penny, you know, to sort of say, okay, you know, then it can bring it into that range. So, I think that they're, they're working on a variety of ways to do that. I don't know how successful, but especially the outreach is, but that's, that's, I'm not saying that it is, or it isn't. I just I don't know. -Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

He made it clear that he isn't sure how successful their programs addressing food access have been. Regardless, he believed their LINK match program likely goes a long way for people and makes Green Top more accessible for people with lower incomes, echoing sentiments of Katie and Dana.

### *Food Access as Community Outreach and Support*

One of the primary roles that Green Top has, according to Katie, is that they make charitable donations to local non-profits in the community. For Green Top, this is a way for them

to address food access beyond providing food, but rather supporting the community's economic and personal well-being. Shannon and Katie described a program called "Roundup at the Register" in which consumers can round their total purchase up to the next whole number, and that amount will be donated to a different specific cause each month. Shannon also discussed about another program in which you bring your own bags instead of using the paper bags at the store, and you receive a token which you can place in a jar, representing a small donation to the organization of your choosing, out of three determined by Green Top for that month. Even Richard, a West Bloomington resident who doesn't typically shop at Green Top, supported their programs such as the ones described above. Shannon did explain that some people find their charitable programs confusing, especially since they have a reputation for struggling financially.

*The last other like big role that I feel that makes this different than like, say going to a chain grocery store is the charitable contributions that we do specifically to local places. So, the positive, the roundup at the registers directly from the shop, like any shop where you have to be an owner, and then the positive change is coming from Green Top, they're donating the five cents. So that's two programs right there, that and those are like our checks every month. It's so exciting to see those checks grow in amount because they used to be like \$1,819. And now they're like on average, like \$2,200 or up and so it's really cool to see that increase... Walmart might give you like a \$20 gift card for your raffle at school or something but they're not going to give like those thousands of dollars every month to someplace local. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I love that we give back to the community by rounding up at the register and I think it's for change where you donate if you don't take a bag, we give you a little token thing that represents a nickel and that's the cost of a bag and so if you don't, then you can just donate whatever charity you designate. you know, I love that we can do that. Because I know I'm sure some people look back and say, well, if you need money so badly, why are you giving money back? Because our ultimate goal isn't just to make money. You got all these other things that we promised people that we were going to do, and that's one of them to give back because these charities. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I love their, their giveback program, I believe where you can they give you like little pebbles or whatever and you can basically put them towards nonprofits and they make donations towards nonprofits and investments in that way, investments in the community in that way. There's a lot of things about the grocery store and what it stands for that I actually support and agree with them on. -Richard, West Bloomington Resident*



Meghan, an employee of Green Top, also explained that some of the outreach they do is beyond the local level. She explained that Green Top had an employee go to Washington, DC to discuss organic foods.

*The impacts that we've had on a more governmental level is huge. For instance, my marketing manager, she went to DC to vet for us for the organic coalition. So that's huge. National situation, government agencies and they're, they're listening to somebody's little tiny town in the middle of Illinois. And we have a say in that. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Meghan made it clear that based on everything they've done regarding community outreach, she believes the Bloomington community would be worse off without them.

*And if we were to close like tomorrow, it would not just impact the staff. It would also impact the owners. It would impact the people that we sell their products of. It also would impact over like twelve, even beyond that, not-for-profit organizations that struggle to gain funding. Like you probably have been told, we gave out \$25,000 in charity funds last year, and we're definitely going to oversee that this year. And that's huge. That's over \$25,000 that wouldn't be there. And we are consistently giving food to two new nonprofit organizations two or three times a week. And that just means other people would not be getting food. So just the community impact is huge. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Not only did Meghan believe that the store closing would obviously impact the staff and the owners, but that non-profits benefit greatly from their charitable donation programs. For example, she stated that they gave \$25,000 dollars to the community in the form of funding to local non-profits. To her, if Green Top closed, that would be \$25,000 less available to the community. To Meghan, Katie, Shannon, and Richard, Green Top's initiatives to donate funding to local non-profits signals an emphasis on supporting food access beyond their cooperative, aiding the community at large.

#### *Education as a Form of Food Access*

When asked about food access, all four board members interviewed mentioned the educational programs provided by Green Top. Cassandra, for example, believed that one of their



major goals is to help people understand the importance of knowing where your food comes from. For Cassandra, helping people to understand where their food comes from meant people with local farmers who provide products to Green Top. Briana discussed how they support this end by inviting speakers to discuss different issues that matter to them – in this case, she mentioned a man who studies food cooperatives. She also stated that Green Top offers cooking classes to help people learn to cook on a budget, among other themed classes. Some of the cooking classes offered, she explained, are also free for people with SNAP benefits.

*I think we do this pretty well with things, the educational programs, I think it's to teach people the importance of what food is. It's not just like, like plate to mouth. It starts much earlier than that. We know people have made better connections with the farmers that we stock. They've met them. They've tried foods fresh from the farm. Maybe they were never Farmers Market people, right? Like they're just not morning Saturday people, but they'll come here, and they've met the farmers and we're creating those connections... - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I think it's an there's certainly an educational mission to, to sort of educate people I mean, you know, we've got this guy from Canada coming in. I think there's probably a lot of education and about the issues but also just about cooking like we have somebody who runs classes into kind of intended for SNAP recipients. It's free. So, they, they pay five, and then they get \$5 in, in dollars vouchers, I can't remember how it works, but it's they get that money back. And it's like cooking on budget and cooking that, you know, for family and for small children and getting children involved in cooking and all of that kind of stuff. And it would be hard to do that anywhere else, I think, in town. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Dana, a local food access expert and Green Top owner, explained more about the cooking classes Green Top offers. Dana explained that the cooking classes started as simply addressing food access, but transformed into teaching people how to eat healthy, as she believed access to healthy food is a right. She discussed the pricing for the cooking classes, as prices went up to cover the costs of offering the cooking classes for free for SNAP recipients. Moreover, SNAP recipients receive a free bag of food with ingredients from the recipes taught in each cooking class. Dana and Shannon explained that the cooking classes offered are also typically vegan and

gluten free with an emphasis on seasonal eating. Dana believed people might perceive the classes a certain way, especially since it might not sound like it is accessible for all. To Dana, she believed much of the class is helping people understand what to do with certain kinds of produce, to provide education for those learning to eat healthy.

*But like it kind of became something that wasn't so much about like food access as it was about like, teaching people how to eat healthy, and that that that's something that you are, that a right, like you should have the right to eat healthy. It started out \$5. And it's kind of gone up because we realized that to pay for the class, the people who were paying to have a spot here, that paying students had to pay a little bit more. So now it's \$10 and that covers all the costs of like the food and the people who are SNAP users and not paying the \$10. And then also on top of that, anyone who takes the class that uses SNAP gets a free bag of food with ingredients from the recipes that they're using that I teach in class that day. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*I think it seems really shi-shi when like, you say like, it's like a vegan, gluten free, seasonal eating class like that sounds very pretentious... Like doesn't sound like something that like is for everybody even though it is. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*We have teaching, we have classes in this kitchen all the time that, you know, teach you how to make vegan recipes, gluten free and how to use you know, there's certain things that substitute for other foods that maybe you can have or how to use you know, your produce when you got it like how to deal with a squash...Never heard of it - looks weird? That kind of thing. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Katie believed that beyond cooking classes, individuals can learn about other topics that Green Top values. For example, she not only mentioned the cooking classes, but she also explained that there are opportunities to learn about topics like seasonal foods, and how to use less waste or be zero waste. She believed you can learn about many topics from Green Top because they focus largely on education.

*I think another big role that like people don't realize is like, I view this place like an education spotlight. We're always educating people on like, what's in season or how to store stuff or how to recycle things or be less waste, like Zero Waste people. Of course, we have the cooking classes. I don't know what else do we do for educate. I mean, education wise, like it's just insane the array of the stuff. that you can learn from some aspect of the store. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Cassandra explained that for Green Top to be considered successful, in her eyes, it would mean that people would learn more about the food system and care about their food. She used the example of more people coming to the cooking classes, including families, and that would make the Bloomington community better.

*I feel like if we're being successful, it means that people are starting to get it. And they started to see all of these things in community and coming here for teaching classes and bringing your kids in for cooking classes, but like that is starting to matter to them. And I think if that's the case, then we are - all of us are better for it, a better community. - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Though they're able to offer cooking classes, Shannon did explain that the board's education committee doesn't have much funding available nor do they have the time.

*We have a board Education Committee, but right now, we're all so busy, we don't really have time to do that. But at some point, we hope to be at a point where you know, we can go have a speaker come and talk to us or, you know, go to a seminar or attend a conference, but right now we just don't have time and a lot of them cost money and we don't have a lot of money either. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Shannon hoped that in the future, they'd host speakers and attend conferences to learn more, but at this moment, it isn't feasible for them to do so based on both time and money.

### *Promotion of Inclusivity*

Although previous respondents discussed perceptions about a lack of inclusivity at Green Top, other respondents point to inclusivity as a primary point of concern and focus for the cooperative. Meghan, an employee at Green Top, explained that inclusivity is important to Green Top, especially since it's becoming a more popular area to talk about as an organization. Meghan and Katie both discussed practice Green Top employs to promote inclusivity. They specifically stated the option of paying a reduced owner's fee (\$100 instead of \$200) for those who are low income. She also explained that there are payment plans for these fees.

*I feel like the being inclusive thing is becoming more and more like the subject. I think in the era of where we are as a society, everything that we do impacts others. And I think*

*the co-op world is very pro proactive with those things, I guess. And I think that's probably one of the biggest things that I've learned from being in this position is how much of an I thought that I would make an impact, but it's beyond that. I'm making impacts well beyond. Well, I hope I am. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*There's like a scholarship fund where like, other owners pay for half of your fee, so they pay \$100. And then you pay \$100, for that hundred dollars is split up between 20 months, so it's only \$5 a month. And it's for anybody who claims they need assistance in that way. So they don't like check anything. It's not invasive in any way. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*You don't have to pay 200 dollars immediately. There's plans and things that you can do to make payments can be as little as \$5 a month. And people think, oh no, I have to pay... it's not like Costco where you have to go and you pay your like 60 or \$75 every year. It's, you know, payments once a month until you are paid up to the \$200. And I want to simplify that. And I've already started that process. We have ownership available online, on our website. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Beyond their reduced ownership fees and payment plans, Meghan also explained that they recently updated their website so that it is available for the hearing impaired, making the website more inclusive, in her perspective.

*We also made our website available for people that are hearing impaired. And then also, if you have a certain device, and you're blind, you can actually it reads out. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Curtis, a local food access expert and owner of Green Top, explained that he believes that even though Green Top will target their marketing towards higher income people to shop in their store, he still believes that Green Top has made efforts to be inclusive to all.

*There's definitely the intention to market outside of just the typical like shopper that would go somewhere that, you know, has those prices. Because, yeah, there's definitely like, targeted marketing that you can do to people that have high income that you want to shop in your store. But I think I think Green Top has done a really good job trying to go outside of those bounds to truly reflect like, Yeah, we do want to serve everyone, which like I've seen. I think that's awesome because that's hard to do when you're struggling as a grocery store. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

For him, he felt that even though Green Top is perceived as struggling financially, he appreciated that they still try to serve everyone to make Green Top a more inclusive space for all.

## West Bloomington Perceptions of Green Top Addressing Food Access

### *Not Addressing Food Accessibility for West Bloomington Residents*

Though Green Top board members and some local food access experts perceived Green Top to be addressing food access, several West Bloomington residents and some local food access experts were critical of Green Top's perception that they're increasing food accessibility for residents. They have a very different way of framing the issue of food access.

For Rick, a local food access expert, and George, a West Bloomington Resident, both Green Top Owners, they expressed that Green Top has had success in attracting middle-to-upper income individuals as customers, however Rick expressed that they've struggled, in his perception, with attracting low-income individuals. He acknowledged that this might be difficult for them and he is unable to provide specific ways they could improve this perception. West Bloomington Resident George mentioned Green Top does believe that offering educational programs is positive but felt that the people he knows that go to the cooking classes are people who also invested large sums of money to Green Top during their planning stages, not low-income people.

*I mean, they're they've reached out and they've, they've gotten some good penetration in their sort of, quote, unquote, natural market, which I think is mostly sort of, well educated, medium to upper income people who sort of want that. I think they have struggled a little bit, especially in the low-income side, and I'm not sure how you do that. I think they've done a good job in doing some reach out and programs. -Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*Now, I know they've done a lot - They've tried to do a lot of community education which I think is a good idea. But the only people that I know that go to those classes are the people that are the exact same kicked in 20-grand when they started kind of people. - George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

In Curtis's perception, opening an organic or natural foods grocery store in a food desert wasn't necessarily going to help food access issues anyway. In Curtis's view, low income people might

not know how to prepare and cook certain products sold in these stores. Curtis followed up by explaining that Green Top's self-identified affiliation with the West Bloomington food desert must be backed up by action.

*You can't you can't open a whole like a whole like a an organic grocery store or something higher end grocery store in a food desert and then expect the people just automatically know and want to buy all these vegetables and think that they're going to have the, you know, time to like do the prep and learn... So, if there is going to be any kind of association with like being in a food desert, you have to back that up with action, doing something. You can't you can't, like, say that and not do so. - -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

#### *Lack of Physical and Financial Accessibility*

Beyond West Bloomington residents and local food access experts' perception of what Green Top is not doing to address food access, respondents also had different perceptions on how to address food access, especially in the West Bloomington neighborhood. Gail and Curtis, both local food access experts, explained the high levels of food insecurity in McLean County and barriers to accessing food, respectively. Curtis, an employee at a West Bloomington-based nonprofit, explained that when thinking about food access, most people want to have access to good food and have time to enjoy it but that there are barriers to letting them do so. He explained that these barriers can include living below the poverty line or having a low income, having disabilities, having kids, or lack of familial support. Dana, a local food access expert and owner at Green Top, explained that the cooking classes offered at Green Top originally were focused on food access, specifically if you have access to healthy food, from where, and how do you get it? She found, similar to Curtis, that it isn't necessarily a matter of not having the food or eating healthy but that it isn't something low-income people are actually thinking about.

*So I find that surprising, I think that this area, is usually what a lot of us will assume to be a white collar community, university community where a lot of people would have plenty of access to food, but it's interesting that McLean county as a whole, which is*

*again, primarily Bloomington-Normal, actually ranks higher than a lot of the other counties in the state for food insecurity. -Gail, Local Food Access Expert*

*I think people like want to eat well, and they want to enjoy eating and they want to have the time to eat. I think there are so many barriers that eating is seriously the one of the last things that is considered and thought about in someone's day that has such a chaotic life...It goes with understanding somebody that does live, like below the poverty line or at poverty or just a very, very low income or the combination of that plus disabilities or kids or lack of another person to help or lack of family. So, like when it comes to eating food, sometimes it's like just the very last thing that is considered. But I don't think it has to be that way... I think every person, every household has a different situation... Do you have kids? Do you have a partner to support you? Are you working multiple jobs? Do you have time? Or do you have health issues disabilities, like all those things play into it...How are you raised with like, around food? How, what habits are formed. So, all that plays a part, but I think most just based on like, what, what I'm able to observe working in West Bloomington. Yeah, a lot of it has to do with like transportation and income in order to afford the, you know, the healthy quality food, it's like it costs way more. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*It was that class kind of started out as like a food access class like do you have access to food? Do you have access to fresh food? Where do you get it? You know, from the food bank? Are you getting it from veggie Oasis through WBRP? Are you getting it from the grocery store? ...It really became more of a learning experience of it's not necessarily that you don't have the food but that like it's not even, like eating healthy or like having access to healthy food isn't even really something that you're thinking about. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Gabbie, a West Bloomington resident, explained her frustration with community members trying to support West Bloomington residents. To her, she thought a lot of their help is strange. She didn't believe much of it empowers people, especially since she doesn't want West Bloomington to be perceived as a "charity case." She also explained that people want to be able to purchase their own groceries from where they want. Food access, to Gabbie, meant being able to live like other people and shop autonomously rather than feeling like she needs help. She further explained that she feels much of the aid received by West Bloomington is from white people who control institutions, much like Green Top. She explained that the organizations that are giving aid to West Bloomington most likely aren't run by people who live in the neighborhood



and they aren't struggling through the same kinds of challenges, like having difficulty getting to the grocery store.

*There's a lot of food relationships that are kind of weird, there's a lot charity. Like, I've always found like that, you know, like, that's not empowering to people. People want to be able to like go buy their own damn groceries , like don't necessarily like...I think people appreciate it, but it's just like, the I think the west side of Bloomington is like sick and tired of being like everybody's fucking charity case. Like, yeah, people just want an opportunity to like live like other people do. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

*Like, it's just like, it's just really weird and like it like it's 100% like white people that really, like, want to help out and whatever. And they control these institutions that are like west institutions with resources and money, but they're not run by the people who like live in the neighborhood. Well, they might live in the neighborhood, but they're the people who own like big old historic homes. They're not the people in the neighborhood that are like, can't get to the grocery store and so like the things they end up coming up with are like, kind, but like totally weird. -Gabbie, West Bloomington Resident*

Much like Gabbie's views that people just want to be able to choose where to shop themselves, Cheryl chose not to be an owner of Green Top because of what she believed to be the high price of ownership. She stated that compared to a co-op she belonged to previously, Green Top's ownership fee seemed high to her. She also explained that her previous co-op she frequented had the option of using volunteer hours to become an owner. She felt this provided more access to people who maybe didn't have the money to afford the membership fee. Further, she believed if Green Top offered cheaper ownership fees (though board members noted that they do) and other options for payment, they might attract more people to their cooperative.

*Well, one of the things that I first noticed was I think its kind of a high bar that they have for the membership capitalization fee. I think that it is still \$200 a year or two. I think it's 200 for the whole time you're there....And by comparison, the food Co Op in the DC area that I was a member of the fee was \$100. Or you could put in basically volunteer hours helping to restock the shelves or do whatever needed to be done there. So that that gave another option for people to be able to participate in the benefits of the co-op there. They don't have the staff time thing. I'm not seeing that here. Yeah. But I couldn't see it might be a way that they could broaden their appeal and broaden their user base.... I think just on the face of it, it still seems high. So, if they had other ways to not even break it up, but cut it down, I think that would probably attract more people. I think that it is just barely*



*in the radius of where it needs to be to be considered by the USDA as a solution to a food desert for West Bloomington specifically. -Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident*

Another West Bloomington Resident George expressed his frustration with community members pushing owners and other community members to support and spend money at Green Top. He found this frustrating because for the people who are pushing people to spend money there, they have, in his perception, a lot of money.

*An owner of a local business who is an owner of green top put a post out on Facebook saying, Come on you guys. It doesn't cost that much more. we need your support, get over there and spend money and I just was like, you know, it's fine for you because you make a lot of money. I don't know. that that's always the attitude there. We need to support this place. we need to make it happen. -George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Even a Green Top board member made clear that she cannot afford to shop at Green Top as her main grocery store. In her perception, she found that people may think she's preaching when she talks about the importance of Green Top, however, she did understand that people can struggle to afford to shop there, and that not everyone can. In her perception, she didn't want to guilt individuals who cannot shop there when trying to market Green Top to other individuals in the community.

*I know I preach that. I can't afford to shop here, mainly, I don't do all my shopping here. But I find it's harder for me to talk to people about that without sounding like I'm preaching to them so that's something I'm trying to learn how to do because it makes it sound like I'm talking, like, like, they want to, you know, they want to screw somebody, you know, but it does - lot of times they can't, they don't have a choice. That's not that's not a decision that they can make. I need to feed my kids, I need to feed my family, you know, so they don't want to think about it and they think we're trying to guilt them into it and just like we don't we're not we don't need everyone to do all their shopping here. - Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

From these responses, it is clear that Green Top Grocery and West Bloomington residents have different perceptions of how Green Top is addressing food access. For Green Top board members, employees, and some local food experts, Green Top is addressing food access as best

they can through emphasizing their LINK match program, providing community outreach and education and trying to be as inclusive as possible. However, West Bloomington residents and other local food access experts do believe that they can do better when addressing food access and that often times food access comes down to a) Can I afford it? And b) Can I get to it? West Bloomington residents, it seems, aren't necessarily looking for how to cook specific foods but rather are looking for their own autonomy in shopping for food.

### **Demonstrated Definitions of Food Access in Motivations for Grocery Store Choice**

#### *Motivations for Shopping at Green Top*

When interviewing respondents, different groups showed different motivations for choosing to shop at Green Top versus a conventional grocery store. All the Green Top board members and a few of the local food access experts specifically expressed that they did shop at Green Top for specific reasons including but not limited to access to local foods and ethical food products, including supporting local farmers and producers, access to healthy foods or foods for specialty diets, and to have democratic control and ownership of the cooperative, thus aligning with the values of a cooperative. West Bloomington residents and a local food access expert expressed motivation for shopping at conventional grocery stores as how physically close to home a store is and balancing price versus quality.

#### **Localism**

George and Curtis, both local food experts and Green Top owners, both expressed their excitement of when Green Top first opened. George was excited to have better access to local food along with having a stronger connection to the producers of those foods. Curtis stated how Green Top was formed, in part, to provide a place for local farmers and producers to sell their goods and for the community to access it year-round. He found this to be a motivation for

shopping there, especially since it is uncommon for conventional grocery stores to gain access to those kinds of grocery items.

*So, when Green Top opened, well, was being planned we thought, oh, this is really great. You know, more local food especially, you know, the, the freshness and the sustainability and the sort of more direct connection to the producer was a really good thing. From our personal perspective, we live about a five-minute walk max from Green Top. So that was also really nice.* -George, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner

*And yeah, just I think to one of the original reasons to open it was to have a place where local farmers and local producers sell stuff year-round. That's huge. That's huge to have. I think the process through other grocery stores is incredibly difficult. And it's not like it's, it's not easy for small producers to get into those bigger stores. So, in that sense, yeah. Very helpful for to producers. Helpful to the community.* -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner

Dana also appreciated that Green Top connects local farmers and producers to community members. In her perception, this gives purchasing products from Green Top a more personal feeling, as you can meet the farmers personally or visit their farms and become familiar with them. By buying those products from Green Top at fair prices, Dana believed this provides farmers and producers a fair wage, but also educates the community on what she believes the actual cost of food is – that is, fair labor, fair treatment of animals, and farms and producers that align with your values. Both Dana and Curtis explained that they spend more on products like milk and eggs than others because they see as the “true cost” of those products.

*So, I think that a big role for green top is being able to be here to say Hey, this is a farmer that we know personally, you know, we've been to their farm, we've seen their operation, they charge \$5 for dozen eggs. This is why it costs so much because you're paying this family to have a living, right. So like you're paying people a living wage, I think that's a big part of like green top is, is education for the community on what food costs. And what's important when you're talking about food. What are you going to make a priority? Is it going to be saving money? Or is it going to be treating people and animals kindly, unfairly? -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*We spend way more on like eggs and milk and certain items that like, they cost more because they reflect like the true value of it and its higher quality. So like for us, that's, that's important to do to spend way more money on food, and maybe cut back on like other things, because, like, we realize that's super important not just for us, but for our,*

*you know, our kids to, to have, to have that good food. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Katie felt that supporting local farmers and producers also infuses money into the local economy in addition to feeling that when you're supporting local, you're more likely to be supporting fair labor practices. Gail, an employee at a local food-related nonprofit, acknowledged that by selling local goods, Green Top can boost the local economy and provide support to local businesses.

*I really liked supporting anything that's local. I really believe that we need as a society need to move back towards the local model and not like the big business model. We try to do our best to not shop online anymore. Just a lot easier said than done. So, for us, we like local because more money goes back into the local economy. We like local because we feel like there's more of a chance that those people are treating their employees fairly -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I do realize it seems like they carry a lot of fresh, natural, or local types of produce and products, kind of boosting the local economy and local companies. Also offering a lot of organic types of goods that any other grocery stores in the area don't have a great selection of. -Gail, Local Food Access Expert*

George, a local food expert and Green Top owner, expressed that he finds shopping local important but understands that not everything can be purchased from a local farmer or producer. However, he did say that he was surprised at how many local goods are available compared to what is not. Products he cannot find local, he expressed, he will purchase fair-trade. Shannon also perceived local food to be important and hopes more local products will be offered in Green Top in the future.

*Because I mean, it is something that it's focused on local, but then the stuff that isn't local, to the extent that we can, I think it really fits some makes sense to try to do that as similarly. Because when we're talking about local producers, we're eggs and milk and vegetables and flour, all that's amazing how many things actually are, you know, honey, candy, you know, chocolate, it's really surprising to me how many things are made locally, and that is really about fair trade. And when we're talking about things that aren't available, locally, you know, like coffees and teas and fruits and things like that. - George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*We sell everything from alcohol that's brewed you know here locally, soaps and lotions and things like that that are made here locally. Fruits and Stuff like that. I would - I*

*would like to see us get even more local producers if we could. I think that's what helps bring people into the store... And we also, you know, I would hope that we encourage people to maybe start their own businesses as far as food producers and things like that, because we do so we do emphasize local food and things like that. So maybe somebody said, Well, now, I, if I can get them to sell my products, you know, I can have a somewhat lucrative business and things like that. I would like to think that we'd encourage people to either start or grow their business. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Both Dana and Katie explained that while the Downtown Bloomington Farmer's Market does provide a venue for local farmers to sell their produce, the farmer's market is mostly seasonal while Green Top operates year-round. Dana and Katie also perceived Green Top to be a viable alternative to the farmer's market as some individuals may not like shopping at the farmer's market, may not want to get up early to attend them, or may not be able to attend them on the weekends.

*But we just thought that it would be so amazing if there is an actual brick and mortar place where local farmers could sell their produce, yeah, because the farmer farmers market is really amazing. But it's also seasonal. And again, I think some people feel like it's not for them like a farmer's market isn't for them. So maybe they'll come to the grocery store instead because it seems more comfortable because they know what to do at a grocery store, a farmer's market, you might not know. So, it was like another way for farmers to get their produce out there. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*It's not just a grocery store. I feel like in this community in particular, it's a great like bridge between vendors and the community. Um, I know a lot of people, like, they idealize it, and they really want to do like a farmers market like, Oh, we want to go to farmers market and then it's like, Oh, we don't want to get up that early, or we're traveling that weekend. And then that was how I was like, I couldn't go on Saturday mornings, so every farmers market or anything like that. And so I think this is a great place to like, bridge those people who like for convenience sake and that sort of thing. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Dana also believed that eating local is not only a benefit to the farmers, producers, and the community but a benefit for the environment.

*It can be like, eating local so that you're lowering your carbon footprint. Something green top kind of plays into the, you know, eating local, it's better for the environment. It's better for your community. It's better for the farmers and the people growing food around you. -Dana*

In providing access to local food, Shannon explained that there are different expectations for local, where local does not mean it was simply grown in the United States but rather central Illinois, or at least the state of Illinois.

*I mean, our definition of local is way different than some of the other definitions local where they just said, Oh, it was grown in the United States. So, it's local, that's garbage. - Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Cassandra felt strongly that if we look to what she calls “outsiders” for food or funding of businesses or nonprofit, we will lack the ability to determine the success of our local institutions.

*We shouldn't have to be reliant on outsiders for food, on outsiders for funding, on outsiders to determine literally the trajectory of businesses and, and what those businesses provide to their workers like it's on us. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Rather, in her view, we should be supporting local businesses so that we can determine our own small businesses success. For Cassandra, this is what it means to support local through Green Top Grocery.

### **Ethical Consumption**

Ethical consumption is important for Green Top consumers, specifically citing fair trade and environmental sustainability as two motivating factors for shopping at Green Top. For board member Cassandra, she believed that working at a cooperative, you inherently come to understand the flaws in the food system. Cheap food, to Cassandra, meant there is exploitation somewhere in the supply chain, which Green Top fundamentally opposes. This can range from exploitation of animals, migrant workers, or other at-risk individuals. She believed that supporting cooperatives means supporting ethical products, including those produced with fair labor practices and fair treatment of animals and workers.

*I think it's impossible to work on a on a food co-op and not start to see that without food, without a secure food system, you're kind of at the mercy of whoever controls the food, right?...That cheap food, which is what we've all come to believe is normal, cheap food*

*means that someone is being exploited somewhere in the in the food chain. Maybe it's animals, usually it's, it's migrant workers and other at-risk individuals and you're thinking, well, is that what I want to support? Is that what I'm going to do?...So, so the more you dig into it, the more you start to see that all these aspects of social, yeah, or just our society that we're - that many people are concerned about whether it's wage disparity, ethical treatment of animals, ethical treatment of workers, economic stability. - Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Fair trade products are one way that Green Top Grocery promotes ethical consumption.

According to Fair Trade USA,

*A choice for Fair Trade Certified™ goods is a choice to support responsible companies, empower farmers, workers, and fishermen, and protect the environment.<sup>3</sup>*

Supplying fair trade products aligns with Green Top Grocery's ends, as such, many of the products you see in Green Top are certified fair trade. Shannon and Rick both perceived fair-trade as important for Green Top as a cooperative, with Rick having stated that their supply of fair-trade products sets them apart from other grocery stores.

*And when we look for, you know, tropical fruit, or coconuts or things like that we still, even if it's not local, we still look for farms that treat their workers fairly and pay them fairly. And, you know, have ethical business practices and stuff like that. -Shannon  
You know, I think it, wherever it makes sense, we should try to do that as a fair-trade product too. And I think they've really increased that, which is I really like to see because I think that also is one of the things that sets it apart, because Green Top sort of isn't really telling a unique story... You know, when you're selling the same snack brands that are sold in Walmart, and there's no way they're going to be able to compete on price...If you tell a unique story and say, this is why it's different or better. I think it stands a better chance of success than saying, well, you know, there's this this product and that product here. -Rick*

Rick explained that Green Top, at one point, did almost discontinue fair trade bananas. Rick, in his eyes, felt this was counter to Green Top's mission. He, along with other Green Top members voiced their dissent, leading to Green Top Grocery reversing this discontinuation.

*And one example of that at one point in the first year or so, you know, they were discontinuing Fairtrade bananas. And it was just something that I felt was ridiculous. And, you know, because they were more expensive and I was like, well at that, at that point, you know, yeah, everything is more expensive. If all we're carrying is Dole, which*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fairtradecertified.org/why-fair-trade>



*is, you know, they still carry Dole as well as fair trade, but Dole is the antithesis of what Green Top stands for. And then we may as well just say, Well, you know, we may get carrots that are more expensive, or cheaper than local carrots. I mean, what's the point? And to their credit, they, they reversed that. -Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner.*

Another form of ethical consumption important to two Green Top consumers, Katie (a Green Top board member) and Cheryl (a West Bloomington resident who occasionally shops there) is environmental sustainability. Katie described this as them being “green,” mentioning specific practices such as utilizing recycled materials in their building, promoting energy efficiency, composting, and incentivizing the use of reusable shopping bags. Cheryl, an occasional shopper of Green Top, found motivation to shop at Green Top through their bulk goods section. She expressed excitement about being able to bring her own containers for bulk goods.

*I love that it's just incorporated in the store that things are more green than they need to be like. So, you know, they don't like brag about it like, Well, this was made from recycled stuff where these windows are like energy efficient or whatever. It's just kind of a given...They handed out - they had the report for the year. And it talked about like, how many gallons of water was saved by like, the way we built it or like, how much for me a big thing for this store is that they compost like I love that they compost stuff from the deli. You can compost stuff here. We live in an apartment. So, we bring in our compost and put it in the bin here...So, like just their environmental stuff, they don't preach they don't charge you for a paper bag, but they give you they reward you for bringing your own bag instead or for not taking a bag. So that's like one of the big things that I love because like, you won't see that any chain...They just recently - like a week or two ago - announced that they worked with the health department. And now you can bring your own containers for the bulk section. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I know that Green Top is going to be moving toward a system where you can bring your own container for certain things, but they haven't done it yet. But I'm really excited about that.... that would be something that I would be going in there now more frequently for. - Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident*

For consumers like Rick, Katie, and Cheryl, ethical consumption is a major motivator for shopping at Green Top Grocery, specifically regarding purchasing fair-trade products and promoting environmental sustainability in store products and practices.



## Healthy Foods and Specialty Diets

For consumers such as Briana, Cassandra, Shannon, and Cheryl, Green Top Grocery provides them a venue to purchase health foods and foods for specialty diets, a major motivator for them. Briana explained that it wasn't necessarily the draw of being a co-op that motivated her to shop at Green Top but rather that it had the kinds of products she desires. Cassandra described how she made a lifestyle change due to her health and wanted to eat more consciously as a result. Her support of Green Top is directly related to her healthy living lifestyle. Shannon also felt that one of her motivations for shopping at Green Top is access to healthy foods. Shannon expressed that giving people access to healthy food is a major value to Green Top and for her. Cheryl also found herself shopping at Green Top for specialty food items like bee pollen or bulk oats.

*I liked their kind of health food product mix...But I yeah, I what drew me? I think it wasn't, it wasn't about it being a co-op. I think so much as it was about being the kind of store that I wanted to shop at. -Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*So, I kind of took that as like, Okay, well, that I need to be more conscious of what I eat, less chemicals, just less processing, all that kind of thing. So I don't - I never ate poorly, but I became more conscious of it. And then the more you research, the more you learn and the more it seemed to say, you know, this is something that you should do for your family not just for you for the immediate need but for your you know, for your son and that kind of thing. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*...just a place for people to know they can get healthy. We label everything so we can we can help them with that. So, I think our value is just giving people a healthy- a place where they can buy healthy food know where it comes from and You know, we're, we're looking out for them. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*Yeah, but I do find it mostly higher quality. And sometimes it's exactly what I'm looking for like bulk spices or I put bee pollen in my oatmeal so I can get that there Yeah, usually I will shop there for things I'm, I am specifically looking for there. -Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident.*

In contrast with the other consumers whose motivation to shop at Green Top is access to health and specialty food items, Cheryl does not typically shop there regularly and is not a Green Top

board member. Rather, her motivation to shop there is for singular food products that she cannot access many other grocery stores.

### **Democratic Control and Community Ownership**

The final motivating factor expressed by respondents who were consumers at Green Top Grocery focused on enjoying the democratic control and the option for ownership that Green Top affords them. Briana, a board member, explained that the owners having a voice is important to consumers of Green Top.

*And so a place that is, you know, democratically controlled in the sense that the owners, the owners have a voice, you know, the owner sticks a comment card in the in the box, and if they're not heard, if they're not responded to, they're going to be on the phone with you again, it's not like a corporate store that can just say, you know, like, I'm sorry, we don't do that. -Briana, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Cassandra and Shannon explained that consumers of Green Top can make money back if the cooperative is profitable in the form of dividends, motivating consumers to shop more at Green Top as their success is the owners' profit. Both Shannon and Cassandra felt the benefits owners may receive through democratic control and greater access to employees and decision makers is a major motivating factor for consumers of Green Top Grocery. Dana, expressing similar motivation for supporting Green Top Grocery, also explained that owners have access to an owner's only Facebook group in which they can voice opinions to board members and employees there.

*You, when it is profitable, you make that money back. Why would you not want to be part of that? And you have a voice. So, the company who's headquartered, you know, halfway around the globe can go, you're not profitable enough, we're going to close you down. It wouldn't happen with a cooperative. You would be right in there making those decisions... And then you start to see the democratic side of it and say, well, if I'm going to vote with my dollars in the way that I choose to shop and this entity is also giving me the ability to vote for real and vote from board of directors and decide what - what values the business is going to have. It's going you know, I mean, these the stuff is, hey, I requested to have such, and such product and they got it in because I'm an owner. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*You know, we're not making some guy at the top of the chain rich. the owners are all the people who shop here. And we have a general manager right here and she's the head of, you know, this is the store, if you want to talk to corporate. You don't have to talk to somebody in South Carolina that doesn't know you, or somebody in Washington who doesn't know you. You know, this is where it's at. Decisions are made here...I think most of the time people are reaching out and complaining about something because they feel like no one cares. And it's like, well we can't run from it exactly, because we're right here. -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I'm an owner. So, you have a say in what's going on and Green Top owners come to owner meetings. The board listens to the owners. There's like an owner, Green Top owners Facebook group where people, you know, have different opinions, and they'll put stuff out there about what Green Top's doing. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Meghan, a Green Top Grocery employee, explained that owners are encouraged to share their own opinions with Green Top employees. In addition, Rick described how board members are also encouraged to have open discussions with owners.

*You're encouraged to tell people your opinions on things and open up a box and have people try the, the cookies or, or chips and have a conversation with a customer. We are not a corporate entity that will shy away from sharing, you know, an item with a customer. – Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*I think it's every month like Saturday mornings with the board type thing, where they have some board members, you know, sitting in the, in the teaching kitchen part of Green Top and so I mean, they're pretty easy to reach and pretty responsive. -Rick, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Curtis, an employee at a West Bloomington nonprofit and Green Top owner, believed that the cooperative model is something that more communities are moving towards.

*I think it was really exciting and just like the, the idea of moving, moving more into that direction of like, cooperatively owned and like even worker owned those kind of co-ops or it's like more common and just seeing examples of it like in real life, I think that's going to be the beginnings of the shift, you know, mentally for people. And that perspective, too...Like, I think co-ops are one of those things that have given us glimpses of like, yeah, just a system that functions better and functions for everyone, and especially like within the local community. -Curtis, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Respondents such as Briana, Cassandra, Shannon, Dana, Meghan, Rick, and Curtis all expressed their motivations for shopping at a cooperative as a desire for increased democratic control, especially compared to what they're given in conventional grocery stores. Democratic control, to these respondents, provided them more agency as consumers, in that they are able to participate in the decision-making processes.

### *Motivations for Shopping at Conventional Grocery Stores*

In comparison to Green Top consumers, West Bloomington residents, for the most part, expressed that they shopped at more conventional grocery stores. They had much different motivations for shopping than Green Top consumers; they mostly were motivated by a store's physical proximity to their home and weighing prices versus the quality of the grocery items.

### **Physical Closeness to Home**

For both Cheryl and Richard, both West Bloomington residents, choosing a grocery store to frequent can come down to a store being located in close proximity to their home. Cheryl explained that she will sometimes frequent Common Ground because it's closer to her home and she can walk there. She also explained that many of the goods she will buy at Common Ground can also be found at Green Top, but for her, the slight price difference is outweighed by not having to drive to get there. Richard explained that Kroger is the grocery store he mostly frequents, though he will occasionally shop at other stores as well. His reason for frequenting Kroger is simply because it's the closest grocery store to him. He also explained why he is less likely to shop at Green Top, the reason mostly being that its physical location is not convenient for him. Additionally, because it's new to the community, he doesn't want to figure out the layout or what kinds of goods they offer that he'd purchase.

*Sometimes I'll get it at common ground because is closer and I can just walk down. Yeah, um, but it might be more expensive there. I think there's maybe a 40 to 50 cent difference*

*in the same quantity. But if I'm already downtown, it makes sense to not drive over to Green Top to get it there even if it is cheaper, though. -Cheryl, -West Bloomington Resident*

*It [Kroger] is the closest grocery store to me when I have the need to purchase groceries. -Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

*It [Green Top Grocery] wasn't as convenient for me, as me personally as the other locations that I've frequented for years, you know, green top being fairly new to the community and me not really having a lot of time to shop there and kind of figure out how ... figuring out the layout of store is just what they had to offer for my shopping needs. – Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

Convenience, specifically with a close physical proximity to a grocery store, is a major factor for why they choose to shop at grocery stores close to them compared to Green Top.

### **Weighing Price Versus Quality**

Price of goods is highly important to West Bloomington residents and one of the local food access experts. For Dana and George, shopping solely at Green Top is not a feasible option. Both Dana and George explained that while they both shop at Green Top Grocery, financially they must shop at other grocery stores to maintain their budgets.

*We shop at Aldi because like we can't afford to not shop at Aldi, which I think a lot of people are in the same boat, but I think that we can all make small steps. -Dana, Local Food Access Expert, Green Top Grocery Owner*

*I would just go to green top for philosophical reasons. I would come home, and [my partner] would probably say, you know, this is two dollars cheaper at fresh thyme. And I would say I don't care. But you know she is a very good shopper and saves a lot of money. -George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

George was also critical of the produce offered at Green Top, saying that even though he and his partner support Green Top including their emphasis on local goods, he didn't believe the produce to be up to his liking. He found frustration in this, as he wants to support Green Top for their local produce, but will support other grocery stores that, in his opinion, have better produce.

*They supposedly have locally sourced stuff, which is a great idea, but just speaking very frankly, here, their produce is crap. And I'm a produce guy, I have to have constant*

*supply of vegetables and fruits and I don't like ugly, nasty vegetables and fruits and their stuff, I can't get what I need there. I find that irritating. I suppose if you're only buying a little bit of that stuff, then you don't get the good picks, you know? -George, West Bloomington Resident, Green Top Grocery Owner*

Cheryl, a West Bloomington resident who will sometimes shop at Green Top, found herself mostly shopping at the Kroger in Normal, IL because of both the selection of products she's looking for and because the prices are what she can afford.

*So, I do go mostly to Kroger on East college because I find that has decent selection and prices I can deal with. And I can get most everything that I'm looking for there. -Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident*

Both Cheryl and Richard both perceived the price points of Green Top to be too expensive for them altogether. Cheryl also felt that the selection does not provide her with all the products she may be looking for.

*It's - it's partly that and also partly the, the price points that they have. I know that there are other traditional stores in town, but they have more expensive items. Or, in some cases, they don't have everything I'm looking for. – Cheryl, West Bloomington Resident*

Richard explained that these price points are not beneficial for residents of West Bloomington, not just for him. He clarified that the price points are not affordable for those who have SNAP benefits in particular, which, he believed, many West Bloomington residents benefit from.

*And then when I went inside, and I saw the product and the price points, it was like, whoa, this is... And this is not gonna be good for the people who live across the street because most of these people have link cards and you know, fixed incomes and things like that. So it was kind of a little bit of shock when I walked in and seen, you know, most of the organic products, you know, and I'm familiar with organic products and shopping at fresh thyme and fresh market. And I understand that those things are a lot more expensive than your typical consumer products. And yeah, it was it was a little bit of shock value. -Richard, West Bloomington Resident*

While Green Top shoppers, mostly, have the financial means to shop based on their moral values, purchasing products that they feel are ethical and local, and benefiting from democratic control as owners, West Bloomington residents and some owners of Green Top find that

conveniently located grocery stores close to their homes and affordable prices are most important to their shopping experience. These, rather than moral values, determine their motivation to shop at one particular grocery store. For a few respondents, like Dana, George, and Cheryl, even though they are Green Top owners and do shop there at times, they have to negotiate between their values and what they can afford when making decisions on where to shop. For others, like Richard, Green Top Grocery is out of his feasible price-range, limiting his ability to even negotiate between his values and what he can afford.

### **Understanding Influences of Social Position on Perceptions of Green Top Grocery's Future**

Respondents were asked about what they see the future of Green Top being but also what they see for the future of Bloomington when it comes to issues of food access and food security. Their responses illuminated different perceptions of what the future could and should hold for Green Top and for their communities.

#### *Green Top Perspective*

When asked about what the future of Green Top would look like, most board members were optimistic that Green Top would succeed and become a fixture in the community. Their focus was mainly on financial success and expansion of their cooperative. This included increased ownership, more locations, and more people using Green Top as their primary grocery store.

Both Cassandra and Meghan hoped Green Top will become financially stable in the future, with Cassandra hoping Green Top will pay their debt back and eventually make a profit. Meghan, an employee of Green Top, simply hoped that they last as an institution. She wanted Green Top to remain in the community long term. She hoped they'll be around longer than two or three years.



*I mean, the big goal is just financial sustainability. Yeah, you know, the big, big goal is getting our sales and margin and that balance sheet, to a point where we are, we're making enough of a profit to be able to pay back all the lenders, I mean, that's the, that's the big one, getting over that hump and it's this slow burn upwards and trying to, you know, to do what we can and learn what we need to learn in order to help, you know, support the store, you know, and keep our eye on all these things that are happening constantly. But to try to get us in that place where by the time we get to a point where, you know, the sales are up that we haven't also burned through all of our cash, you know, so that you then have to build up a new cash reserve in order to start paying our bills....So yeah, so the big goal is just financial sustainability, to get out of the, you know, where we have three modified terms of our loans, our major lender remodified, remodified the terms in the loan, and part of that modification was you have to hit these targets. So, we are we're still working on hitting those targets, and getting those you know, getting those targets in a in a realistic place. Stay open.... If I were to pick like the big, hairy audacious goal, it would be to get the store cooking, you know, consistently hitting those sales goals to where ultimate... I mean, there are stores our size who are doing 14, 15 million at out of a store the size. It's completely doable. -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I would love for us to be able to get to the five-year anniversary, 10 year anniversary and I just would really like to see us be here long term. I think that would be ideally, the best thing for the community is to stick around for more than, you know, two, three years. - Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Cassandra, Shannon, and Meghan all noted that in the future, they saw Green Top as building another store. They indicated that at some point, they'd also like to have a grocery delivery business as well, but that these goals are far off for Green Top because they're still trying to find their financial footing and footing in the community.

*I think building another store, maybe at some point would be a very long-term goal also. I know some of our owners have been talking to you about getting into the grocery delivery business, which we would love, but that's a pretty big capital project. you're talking about buying a vehicle, and hiring people just to pick up the orders and then go deliver it, which is more insurance and other things and we're still trying to find our footing, you know, in the community, as far as you know, making sure that we reached out to everyone that we could have, which we all kind of know that we haven't yet. And so, we're kind of struggling with that. – Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*So, once we were able to hit like maybe 8 million, you can start looking for a second site. Maybe something that's close to campuses, or uptown and have a satellite site. You know, we talked about - people always talking about like a mobile grocery that can go into the west side. So far, nobody's been able to do it and have it be sustainable. But I mean, you*



*know, I don't know what's out there, pop up shops, that kind of thing. – Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I would like to possibly open up a second location in like 10 years. That would be awesome one day. Definitely not as big as this one. I would like to possibly do it small, maybe by ISU. Yeah, that's, that's pretty much where I kind of see it. – Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

Both Meghan and Katie, in addition to a second location, both expressed interest in having a food truck. Meghan would like to see a food truck where they could work with Veggie Oasis, a program out of the West Bloomington Revitalization Project, in which community members are given free produce from the Downtown Bloomington Farmer's Market and grocery stores. She and Katie, much like Shannon, talked about grocery delivery system.

*And I would like to maybe get a food truck, work with Veggie Oasis. That's something that we had spoken about, I would love to be able to do that. Then maybe we could deliver food to, you know, maybe some old folks that don't really leave their homes very often and deliver to our small little community here. -Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*Okay, um, I'd love to not see a second store, but to see a food truck like they, they really want to do a food truck and by food truck, I don't mean like restaurant, I mean, like they want to have deliveries like for whether, whether it's more of like an Instacart thing where like people order through an app and you know, it gets delivered to them, or like us having a Food Bus and taking it over to like West Side Bloomington or over in normal and that sort of kind of like a bookmobile...Some people would say like to open another store over a normal, but that's so far away that we don't really think about that right now. We just want to be sustainable. I just want to be you know, pay our bills -Shannon, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

These respondents agreed that they hope for a second location or expanded endeavors in the future, however these decisions, like Shannon said, are contingent upon their financial sustainability and coming out of debt.

Several other future goals were listed by board members and the employee at Green Top. Meghan and Katie would like to see more owners. Cassandra would also like more owners, but thinks beyond, hoping for more consumers in general.

*So, what I would like to see is more, more ownership within the store. I would like to see higher customer count, because that would mean we are having more of a community impact. – Meghan, Green Top Grocery Employee*

*Maybe it's because I'm on the board, but I tried to, like, look at the store more as a shopper than as an owner because anyone can shop here. And I think like, that's what's going to make the store succeed as much as we definitely do need owners, we need to, like really reach out to people to shop here. -Katie, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

*I would like to see this be the place that you've got 60, 70% of your shoppers, this is their first stop. This is the place that they come because it's an amazing experience. They get great food. They understand that it's better quality food and it's fresher. And then you know, the other 30% are stopping here, even if it's just like specialty stuff you know like, oh Green has this one particular kind of locally made pasta, whatever it is. Or you know, nowhere in town gets in things like paw paws, I'm going there to get it. Holidays, oh I want a little bit nicer stuff. I want to get those neat cheeses or those special squashes that are heirloom squashes... -Cassandra, Green Top Grocery Board Member*

Briana hoped that Green Top will gain more name-recognition in the future. She hoped that Green Top will become a household name in the community and is hopeful that will eventually happen for them. Briana also believed that once they get to the point of meeting and exceeding goals, specifically financially, they can set new goals for new equipment or a larger deli.

*Keep shopping if you want the store to be here. And I think within I mean, I would love to say within five years or so that it becomes the sort of place that when you mention it or when you wear a shirt somewhere that people don't ask you green top. What's that? And I think that's right now that's a sort of vision is I, I think we're going to get there. I mean, I believe, I do believe that we're going to get there, but I just don't know when. -Briana*

*Then getting to a point where we're just hitting them is not the concern anymore, and we're, we're exceeding them and we can start setting new, new goals, like maybe the new goal is, you know, different kinds of equipment, newer equipment, you know, changing out parts of the stores, being able to achieve some of the ideas that they have, you know, maybe, maybe what the GM wants to do is have a bigger deli operation or maybe they would want to do you know more, I don't know, like to be able to do those things requires first that we, that we focus on sustainability and that's a hard thing. -Briana*

Briana recognized that in order to obtain new equipment or an expanded deli, that they must reach financial sustainability. Ultimately, these respondents recognized that their goals are contingent upon paying off their debt and becoming more financially successful.

### *West Bloomington Perspective*

For the two West Bloomington residents of color (Richard, a black male, and Gabbie, a Latina woman), they believed Green Top must reconcile with the West Bloomington Community. Because of Green Top's broken promise to address the food desert in the West Bloomington community, both Richard and Gabbie believed Green Top has failed at this effort by locating outside of this neighborhood and that they'd have to reimagine how they operate to make the space feel more inclusive for West Bloomington residents. Further, Rick, a local food access expert and Green Top owner, and Richard, a West Bloomington resident, both discussed how West Bloomington residents are taking food access into their own hands, without the help of Green Top, by creating their own affordable grocery store. Richard explained that reconciliation with the West Bloomington community could be as simple as admitting what they did – in his eyes, deceiving West Bloomington with the hope for an affordable grocery store in their neighborhood.

*The simplest form of reconciliation would just be admitting what they did, like just, you know, even if they got to the fall guy and put it on. Just admit what you did was wrong and move on. Because what you're creating is a culture around your project that is not good. It's building up negative energy and intention. Because people aren't, people aren't stupid. They know what you did. They can't continue to sit here and say, No, we really didn't. People are starving. We got statistic over 100 children in West bloom to go to bed hungry every night. Like, what are you doing? -Richard*

Richard felt that they're creating negative energy around their project by not addressing this deceit. He emphasized that West Bloomington children are still suffering from hunger and lack of food access. He asked Green Top "what are you doing?" as a prompt for action. Gabbie, in comparison, felt that their organization needs to reimagine how they govern themselves. She felt that there are two paths they could take, either continue doing what they're doing or for them to rethink their governance and rethink who's in leadership positions.

*If they want it to be more inclusive of other people, it would take a radical reimagining of how they govern themselves and who's in leadership positions. And it would take our radical reorganizing of their like economic whatever, like, I don't know what their business plan or their economic plan is, but it would, it would take a really radical transformation right? and so You know, I think like either they can continue to serve the population that they're serving and like, Who knows if that will be enough to support them. Or if they're seeing that that's like working, but they need to sort of like, rethink what process or the leadership, how they're speaking to people, all that stuff, you know?  
– Gabbie*

This connects to her previous statements of how Green Top was founded and led by white people, thus appearing as a white space. Gabbie stated,

*It will take some deep like grappling with their souls like you, that's not like an easy thing where we're like, make it like, Black History Month and like paint a little mural or whatever, like, you know, it's like, there are easy fixes like that but that's not a structural actual real thing. -Gabbie*

She understood that Green Top must reflect on their decisions and that they cannot be in vain, but rather will be more structural in order to make Green Top look and feel inclusive for West Bloomington residents. When asked about what respondents see for the future of Bloomington, Rick and Arthur mentioned the development of a grocery store in West Bloomington. Rick explained that they plan on buying a small property and making it an affordable and accessible grocery store.

*You know, there is a group attempting to open another grocery store on the west side...Market Street Plaza, I think is what they're calling it. I think it's going to be an enormous challenge. They want to, to buy and overhaul a small shopping strip shopping center... But their goal is to basically have in the middle of West Bloomington an affordable and accessible grocery store. -Rick*

Rick, however, did believe that it will be difficult for them, especially since Green Top struggled despite receiving a large number of donations and investments.

*And it is interesting because it's, I mean, I wish them all the luck. I think they're biting off a huge if they, I mean, it's as obviously Green Top is struggling, despite the fact that it raised a fair amount of money and despite the fact that has a lot of resources, etc, etc. I mean, it's really, really tough and this group is going to find it really tough, too. -Rick*

Richard, a West Bloomington resident, however, felt that this project will address the food desert problem in West Bloomington in its entirety. He stated that the plan is for the grocery store be paid off in full so there is no mortgage to pay, and that it will be a not-for-profit grocery store so that they won't be focused on profits. Rather, he said, they hope to be completely focused on accessibility, paying their employees, and restocking the shelves of the store.

*That project in its entirety is going to address that the entire food desert issue in West Bloomington is going to give people in that community immediate access, you know, the way that we plan to have the grocery store set up is a not for profit grocery store, with no mortgage tied to it. We want to pay for the entire thing upfront so it's always there. It's always going to be available is not tied to price points and price. Is is solely for accessibility, you know, paid employees and restock the shelves. That's it, pay the bill. That's it just exists, right? We don't want to profit. We don't want to make \$1 off of it. So that's what makes this different makes it sustainable. -Richard*

West Bloomington residents did not see Green Top's future in the same way as Green Top board members and employees do. Rather, they hoped that Green Top will reconcile with the West Bloomington community to provide greater inclusivity. However, they are not reliant on Green Top and are actively trying to find new avenues to address food access issues for West Bloomington residents who are food insecure.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My first research question is “How do people form their perceptions of food cooperatives in general, and Green Top specifically?” The goal of this study, then, was to look at how residents of the West Bloomington neighborhood form their perceptions of food cooperatives, using Green Top Grocery as a local case study to examine this phenomenon. In that regard, the first research question focused on aspects of perception, asking “How do people form their perceptions of food cooperatives in general, and Green Top specifically?” Findings from this study reinforced existing empirical research done by Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston (2018), in that respondents’ cultural capital, such as the value of “knowing where your food comes from” or ideas surrounding “healthy eating,” was linked to respondents’ patterns of consumption. For Green Top Grocery’s leadership, including board members and employees, and select food access experts and West Bloomington residents, this meant shopping at Green Top for ethical food products. According to Kennedy and Horne (2019), consumption is highly related to status seeking, so we can see the likelihood that consumers of Green Top are attempting to obtain social status through their purchases, even if not a conscious effort. Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston (2018) see that we use our cultural capital to create distinctions between people, specifically regarding aesthetic and ethical values. Similarly, respondents were divided on their “cultural capital” when looking at their consumption patterns and values related to consumption. Respondents who shopped at Green Top Grocery talked about social issues such as environmentalism, localism, ethical production, fair trade, and food access. Meanwhile, those who did not shop at Green Top Grocery, or who shopped there less frequently, were more likely to discuss social issues related to lack of food access (albeit a different definition of food access than Green Top Grocery leadership), and issues of diversity and inclusion. For example, Alkon

and McCullen (2010) discussed the liberal habitus of whiteness, in which individuals looked for both luxury products but also expressed ethical values that aligned with social liberalism, such as environmentalism and cultural diversity. While this is true for Green Top Grocery board members and consumers, the three individuals of color (two Latinx people and one black male), expressed discontent in what they believed to be a lack of diversity and inclusion within Green Top. Further, this liberal habitus of whiteness lends itself to a moral superiority of ethical consumption, in that the white respondents who shopped at Green Top expressed the importance of buying local and “voting with your dollars”, thus excluding many low-income people and people of color.

When examining the second research question, “How are respondents’ social location reflected in their motivations for consumption?”, data illustrated that respondents who shopped at Green Top Grocery were more likely to cite the importance of altruistic values as their motivations for shopping at a cooperative generally, but Green Top specifically. These findings reflect the outcomes from Streed, Cliquet, and Kagan’s (2017) study, which found that a predictor of shopping at food cooperatives were altruistic values, believing they made a community impact through supporting cooperatives. Further, all members of Green Top Grocery leadership that were interviewed were white women. All members of the Green Top Grocery board are white females, except one white male. Alkon and McCullen (2010) discuss the liberal habitus of whiteness, expressed among the white representation of the board, where ethical consumption combines both highbrow, luxury products with believed progressive, liberal ideology surrounding issues of environmentalism and cultural diversity. They’re afforded this due to their social location. In connection to research done by Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston (2018), we can see that respondents who are consumers of Green Top are likely displaying “eco-

habitus” in that they’re using their consumption patterns that “privilege environmental protection and social justice (2), as a display of status. In this manner, they have cultural capital pertaining to ethical consumption of food, such as an affinity for local, organic, and fair-trade goods, while evangelizing these values as morally superior. In certain cases, such as in the responses from Dana and Shannon, they attempted support for Green Top, both being heavily involved with Green Top as a board member and owner, respectively. However, they both admit they are unable to shop exclusively at Green Top because of their financial situations. Both express that they shop at other places, with Dana even explaining she shops at Aldi, the discount grocery chain. For them, they are attempting to claim a certain level of status through their knowledge of ethical consumption through shopping at Green Top, however they faced economic barriers to engaging in this behavior fully. While omnivorousness can be defined as when “cultural elites seamlessly blend low-brow and high-status consumption” (Kennedy, Baumann, and Jonston 2018: 4), Dana and Shannon were doing what I refer to as “requisite omnivorousness.” Differing from omnivorousness, Dana and Shannon were not voluntarily opting into low-brow culture in the form of food consumption. Rather, their economic situation restricts them, leading to “requisite” omnivorousness in consuming both low and high brow culture much like cultural elites. However, they were not voluntarily opting into low brow culture, which is an important distinction. In this way, they’re benefitting from the appearance of selecting into omnivorousness, however, they’re at the same time restricted from claiming exclusive moral superiority of ethical consumption due to financial restraints. Regardless, they can use their eco-habitus to follow and express messages of ethical consumption, specifically regarding the food system because of their requisite omnivorousness.



When reflecting on the third research question, “How might Green Top Grocery influence the formation of these perceptions?” data illustrated that Green Top must adhere to both its organizational and social needs in order to be successful, much like McCahan (2018) claims, as cooperatives typically face challenges from other grocery stores and natural food stores to remain successful, let alone open in the first place. In order to compete with conventional grocery stores and natural food stores, Green Top finds themselves making decisions that create more economic benefit to them, but at the expense of other populations. For example, Green Top initially made claims to focus on aiding the food desert in West Bloomington in their planning stages, but in the end, they selected a location outside of that neighborhood to garner financial success, through suggestions from a market feasibility study. They also suffer from the continued perceptions as having expensive prices that make them out of reach for people who suffer from inaccess to food. This aligns with Haedicke’s (2014) findings, in which he states that some cooperatives will forgo their missions or values to economically compete in the competitive grocery market, especially as more main-stream stores sell local, organic, and fair-trade goods.

Expanding on this theme, Green Top faces a poor reputation, especially as being elitist, expensive, and inconvenient compared to conventional grocery stores, much like Moncure and Burbach (2013) found among cooperatives at large, who they explain suffer as a result. Further, Green Top, much like other alternative food institutions, is a white space or a white countercultural project, as Burdick (2014) refers to it. Even when their values and mission align with aiding certain populations, including claims of promoting diversity, these white spaces often erase any sense of belonging or identity for those they’re attempting to help (Dixon 2014). In the case of Green Top Grocery, Green Top board members and leadership are creating a space that

reflects their feelings and values, specifically towards the food system, with helping other populations and promoting diversity as a peripheral or secondary act. Therefore, Green Top appears to address food access and inclusivity from their own middle-to-upper class white perspective, rather than in the perspective of people of color or low-income people. This can serve to discourage or even prevent participation from people of color and low-income people, as Green Top's attempts at addressing diversity and inclusion will be shrouded in middle-to-upper class white people's lifestyles and lived experiences, limiting possible successful attempts to address diversity, inclusion, and food access as defined and operationalized through the voices of people of color and low income people.

Jonason (2014) describes how there are many barriers for low income people (and thus people of color) to participating in alternative food institutions, including cultural barriers. These can include "if only they knew" stances, such as the ones taken by several respondents in this study and by Green Top itself. For example, educating the community is one of their specific "ends", stating "Because Green Top Exists: the community has information on how to make the best food choices and understands the impact of those decision." This, to Jonason (2014), represents an attempt by Green Top to provide cultural capital to influence consumption. This also illustrates that for Green Top, they're further enforcing white cultural norms in their education, as their leadership and programs are planned and implemented largely by white people. This contributes to the different and often oppositional understandings of food access by West Bloomington and Green Top respondents compared to those who represented Green Top leadership. In this study, all white respondents discussed food access in a manner that illustrated this concept as a means of acculturating people of color to their understanding of how to address the current food system through education and "better" foods. Meanwhile, food access to West

Bloomington neighborhoods was framed as having access to affordable food at an and accessible location and the right to choose what kinds of food they want, rather than being presented a perception of what is “right” or “good.”

Further, Green Top may find value in trying to resist hyperrational and capitalistic decision making that seems to hinder their ability to face the inequalities suffered by populations in their community and further hinders diversity, intellectually and ethnically. This conclusion is supported by Hale and Carolan (2018), stating that cooperatives should be resistant of capitalist rationality and egalitarian decision making in order to create more diversity within their cooperative ranging from resources, membership, to practice. For Green Top, this may mean a re-examination of their decision-making processes, much like respondents Richard and Gabbie suggest, and not only considering how these organizational choices may hinder their calls for diversity, but how they could actively take stances that will deliver their desired end-goals: inclusion or exclusion.

### **Social Implications**

For cooperatives, they may need to consider their foundational values and mission statement when making organizational decisions at the inception of their cooperative. As Green Top has illuminated, these decisions are crucial to whether or not people of color or low-income individuals may feel excluded or included in the project, especially when trying to participate in these processes. Cooperatives may need to acknowledge how their corporatization and participation with large neoliberal leaning groups, such as National Co+Op Grocers, while aiding in providing discounts and access to wholesale goods, might influence their decision making. Cooperatives should consider the trade-offs when participating in these kinds of programs. Further, they may need to address issues of whiteness, racism, and exclusion in the food system,

but also in their cooperatives both at the formation and in the future. Data shows cooperatives, thriving on collective action and thinking, may need to increase their diversity not just to garner more financial success or pay their debts, in the case of Green Top, but to create truly a more diverse space that both feels like and acts as a place where low-income and people of color feel comfortable and accepted. This includes representation in board and leadership positions.

For Green Top, this means they are faced with important choices. According to several respondents, Green Top has two paths to choose from. In the first path, they may reconcile with the people of West Bloomington to address the perceptions of betrayal relative to addressing food access and how their organizational decisions have been alienating people of color and low-income people. This can be something like addressing food justice and racial justice issues, providing a more nuanced understanding of food access – including the perception of food access by low income and people of color in West Bloomington, and investing more overtly in the West Bloomington neighborhood. Further, several calls for more grassroots or community-centered decision making causing their store to have “cooperative spirit.” In contrast, if Green Top were to follow the second path, they may simply recognize who they are and what they are (in response to the perceptions conveyed by respondents) as a high end, natural foods store, rather than claiming to at the least, be something in the middle. They could continue to attempt to garner support (both financially and otherwise) from low income people and people of color through their view of food accessibility without making clear choices that help these populations, however this might do more harm than good. To the West Bloomington respondents like Gabbie and Richard, it shouldn't necessarily be Green Top's job to educate low income and people of color on what is “right” or “good” to eat, but rather give them a seat at the table. Continuing to

follow a corporatized structure for their cooperative, in which capitalist rationality is at the forefront, would fall here, limiting their ability to address issues of diversity and inclusion.

For residents, this means they must continue to balance what they can and cannot do through making informed decisions based on their personal values and goals. For some, this may look like supporting Green Top for reasons related to ethical consumption, such as supporting environmentally friendly goods and practices, supporting fair-trade and organic foods, and supporting ethical labor practices. For others, this may mean making decisions on what is economically feasible for them at the time. This means they may be shopping where they can due to external constraints. And for some, this may mean requisite omnivorousness, in which people's values prompt them to shop at Green Top when they can but shopping elsewhere due to financial barriers.

### **Limitations and Future Contributions**

This study is largely limited by both a struggle on the part of the researcher to find West Bloomington residents as respondents for her sample, specifically people of color, and because of a lack of ability to interview additional participants due to Covid19. Despite this, the data collected is robust and paints a clear picture of perceptions of cooperatives by the respective respondents, especially since a lack of diversity on the part of both the Green Top Grocery leadership sample and the Local Food Access expert panel is reflective of the Green Top Grocery board and employees (mostly) and of the demographics of people leading non-profits or doing food-related research in this community: white. This can instead help the researcher to understand how race can inform perceptions of food cooperatives, specifically regarding whiteness in the case of Green Top Grocery. However, in the future, the researcher would find

more West Bloomington residents of color to have a greater understanding of how race and ethnicity may inform perceptions of cooperatives.

In addition to these limitations, the researcher is limited by the scope of research, as it is a case study, so it cannot be generalized to the broader population. For example, this study had a total sample of 13 interviews, with two groups having 4 respondents (local food access experts and West Bloomington residents) and one having five (Green Top Grocery leadership). Furthermore, because this case study is not only limited by sample size but by focusing on a specific cooperative in an individual location, it cannot be generalized to all cooperatives in the US. Regardless, this research can instead inform the possibilities of how perceptions may impact a given cooperative and may be used as a reference for those looking to form or improve a food cooperative. Future research could be conducted looking specifically at a greater breadth of cooperatives in order to get a clearer picture of how one's habitus may affect perceptions and perception making for cooperatives, and how cooperatives may contribute to it.

Moreover, more quantitative research needs to be conducted regarding food cooperatives to provide generalizable data to the population, especially regarding perceptions and perception-making. Future research on large organizations such as National Co+Op grocers and their influence on food cooperatives throughout the country would be constructive as well, as many cooperatives in the US have linkages to them, either in programs or through product distribution. Organizational studies looking at how cooperatives' decision making, and processes compared to conventional grocery stores or natural food stores would also illuminate how cooperatives either differ or do not from these institutions based on their practices. As limited research on cooperatives has been done, especially regarding perceptions and organizational theory, future research in these areas would prove fruitful.

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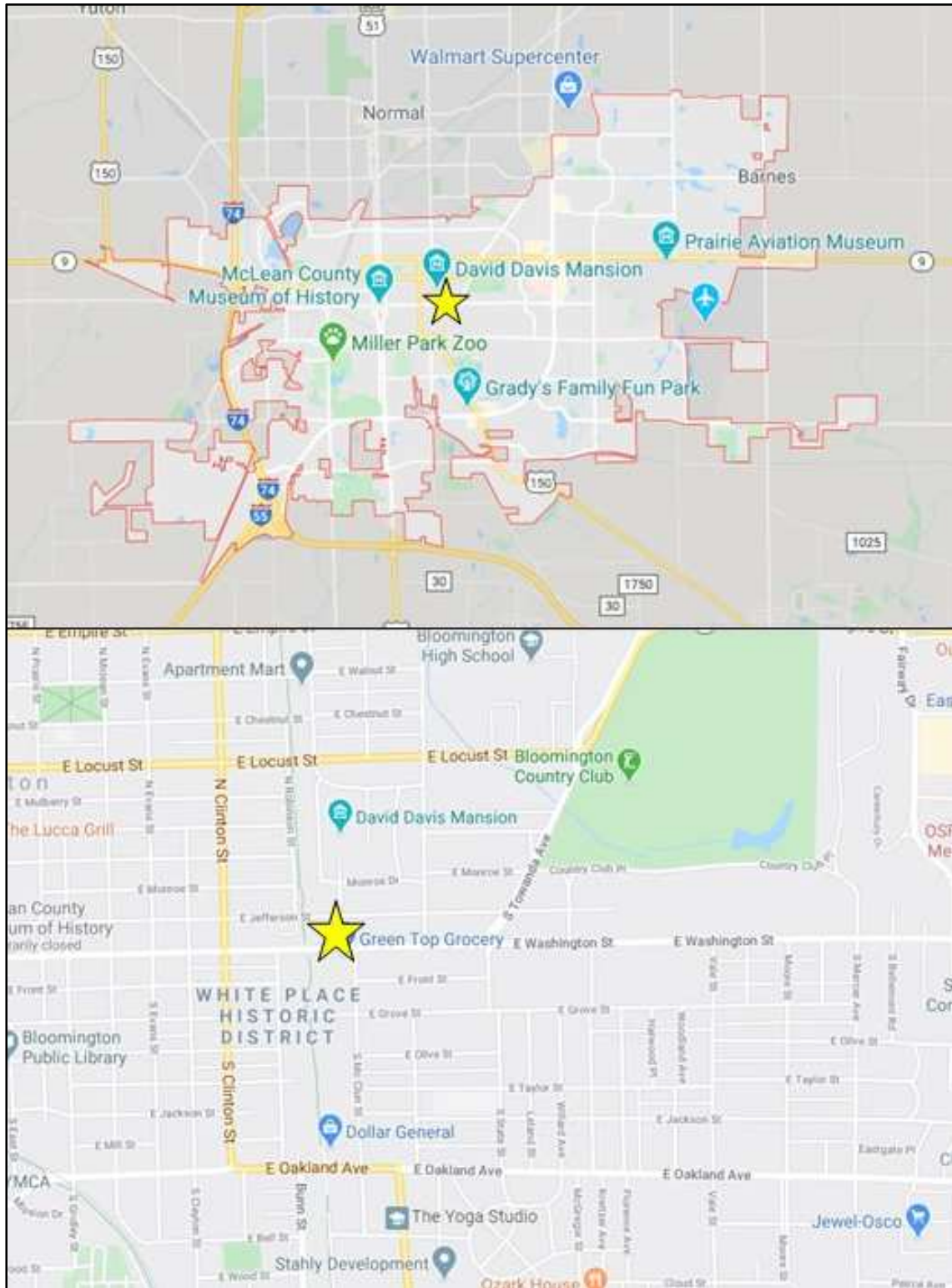
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APPENDIX A: MAP OF BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDES

### Interview Guide – West Bloomington Residents

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
  - a. Your family?
  - b. Your community?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your grocery shopping habits?
3. Can you tell me about the most common meals in your home?
4. Do you have any experience with Green Top Grocery? Tell me about it.
  - a. How do you feel about Green Top Grocery?

### Interview Guide – Community Members, Food Justice & Access

1. Can you tell me a bit about food access in the community?
  - a. On the West side of Bloomington more specifically?
2. Can you tell me a little about your experience with Green Top Grocery?
  - a. Can you tell me about Green Top Grocery's role within the community?
3. Can you tell me about how food justice is being addressed in the community?
4. What do you see for the future of the community regarding food justice?
  - a. Food access?

### Interview Guide – Green Top Grocery Leadership

1. Can you tell me about your role within Green Top Grocery?
2. Can you tell me about your experience with Green Top Grocery, how you became involved?
3. What do you think the role Green Top Grocery plays within the community?
4. Can you tell me about Green Top Grocery's values?
  - a. Goals?
5. What do you see for the future of Green Top Grocery?
  - a. Are there any areas where Green Top could be doing better?



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## Participant Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Rebecca Forsythe, Master's student, and Dr. Joan Brehm, Professor of Sociology in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Illinois State University. The purpose of this study is to understand individuals' perceptions of food cooperatives, specifically Green Top Grocery, and how individuals form those perceptions. This study will also look at the practices of Green Top Grocery that may promote or fail to promote inclusivity.

### **Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because you are over the age of 18 and have been identified as knowledgeable on issues of food access and food justice in Bloomington, Illinois. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will ask to participate in one interview regarding topics related to your knowledge and opinions of Green Top Grocery and food access in Bloomington, Illinois. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be recorded solely for the purposes of the study, with your permission.

### **Are any risks expected?**

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life. To reduce these risks, participants will be given a pseudonym rather than being identified by their name.

### **Will your information be protected?**

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. While participants will be recorded, the recordings will be stored in a password protected folder on the researcher's personal computer. Participants will be given a pseudonym to protect their identity and any identifiers will be removed to protect confidentiality. Information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. The research may be disseminated through the researcher's thesis paper and in the form of academic journal articles.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

We need to make you aware that in certain research studies, it is our legal and ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation



and/or illegal activity on the ISU campus, campus-controlled locations, or involving ISU students to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

**Could your responses be used for other research?**

We will not use any identifiable information from you in future research, but your deidentified information could be used for future research without additional consent from you.

**Who will benefit from this study?**

Society will benefit from this study through the understanding of public perceptions of food cooperatives. This might provide us knowledge on how to better distribute food items or address food distribution through food cooperatives. Participants might benefit from this study through contributing their opinions on Green Top Grocery so that Green Top Grocery might use the most inclusive practices for potential customers and members. Green Top grocery may also benefit from a better understanding of how to attract a wider range of low income owners.

**Whom do you contact if you have any questions?**

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, email Rebecca Forsythe at [rmforsy@ilstu.edu](mailto:rmforsy@ilstu.edu) or Dr. Joan Brehm at [jmbrehm@ilstu.edu](mailto:jmbrehm@ilstu.edu).

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If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or [IRB@ilstu.edu](mailto:IRB@ilstu.edu).

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

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### **Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because you are over the age of 18 and have been identified as a board member of Green Top Grocery in Bloomington, Illinois. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will ask to participate in one interview regarding topics related to your knowledge and opinions of Green Top Grocery. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be recorded solely for the purposes of the study, with your permission.

### **Are any risks expected?**

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life. To reduce these risks, participants will be given a pseudonym rather than being identified by their name.

### **Will your information be protected?**

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### **Why are you being asked?**

You have been asked to participate because you are over the age of 18 and are a self-identified resident of the West Bloomington neighborhood in Bloomington, Illinois. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

### **What would you do?**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will ask to participate in one interview regarding topics related to your food consumption and grocery shopping habits and your knowledge and opinions of Green Top Grocery. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 45 minutes. Interviews will be recorded solely for the purposes of the study, with your permission.

### **Are any risks expected?**

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life. To reduce these risks, participants will be given a pseudonym rather than being identified by their name.

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