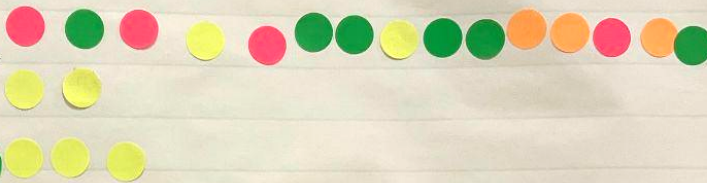


VISIONING OUR FOOD FUTURE

FOOD SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT FOR
BLADEN, COLUMBUS, & ROBESON
COUNTIES



Walmart
Food Lion



Jardín
Family Dollar
Aldi

Garden

Compare foods

Sam Club

Tiendas Mexicanas

Community Cafe Spring 2023
Research Brief

NC STATE
EXTENSION



KATE B. REYNOLDS
CHARITABLE TRUST

Overview

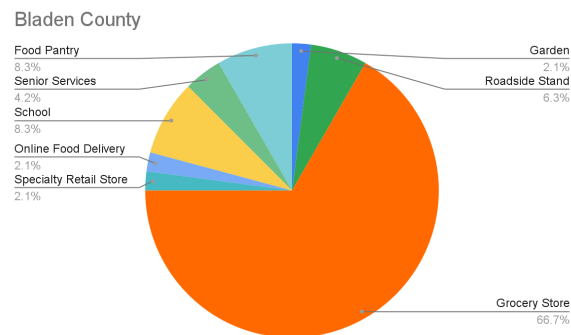
Between March and August 2023, the Visioning Our Food Future (VOFF) team facilitated eight structured focus group interviews with the purpose of examining the healthy food access preferences and experiences of members of under-resourced communities in the project region. The facilitation team attended group meals or Community Cafes, led by a community partner, and adapted this setup to provide meals or snacks in collaboration with other partner organizations in the region. Participants were made up of community members, including people experiencing food insecurity and people leading health and civic programming. Following a Nominal Group Technique method adapted to the circumstances of this project, participants were asked to reflect on and discuss the following questions: 1) where do you access healthy food, 2) what are challenges or needs to accessing healthy food in your community, and 3) what are your ideas on how to improve access to healthy food in your community. Answers shared by participants were listed on large Post-It sheets of paper. Participants were then asked to use dot stickers to vote for the answers that resonated with them the most. The facilitation team also took notes of community members' feedback during large-group discussions.

These interviews were conducted either as a part of existing events hosted by community organizations or were collaboratively planned with community partners. Two events took place in Bladen County (Cooperative Extension Office), two in Columbus County (Waccamaw Siouan Tribal Center, Southeast Community College Small Business Center), three in Robeson County (municipal and Lumbee Tribal Housing Authorities), and one in a public school prioritizing Spanish-speaking families from Robeson County. A total of 120 community members from the project area participated in these events.

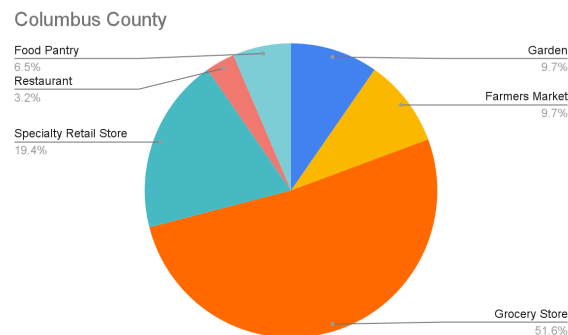
Preferred locations to access healthy food

- Grocery stores were listed most often as the place where participants accessed healthy foods, with Walmart and Food Lion being the most frequently identified grocery brands.
- Many participants mentioned that they drive at least 45 minutes to their preferred grocery store, either because that is the closest, because of the convenience of buying all items in one place, or because of lower prices.
- One group mentioned that community members try to buy lower priced items at Walmart and access higher price items for free from food pantries.
- Roadside farm stands were mentioned as a popular and trusted source for local and healthy foods, although their location and hours are a challenge.
- Also mentioned but less frequently were Meals on Wheels, farmers markets, gardens, specialty markets, and food pantries.
- Overall participants reported interest in consuming local foods but limited availability, inconvenient locations, and lack of gardening knowledge are significant barriers.

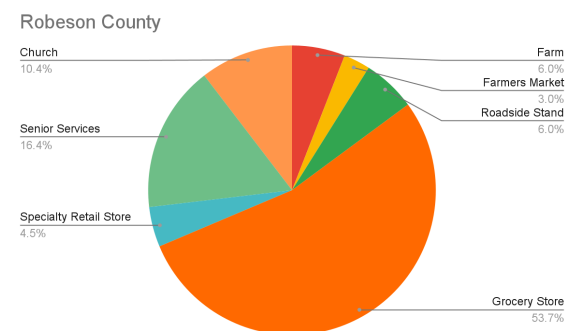
Figure 1. Participants' preferred healthy food access locations by county.



In Bladen County grocery stores were overwhelmingly identified as preferred locations to access healthy food. Schools, roadside stands and food pantries were also mentioned.



In Columbus County grocery stores and specialty retail stores (e.g. meat and seafood markets) were the most preferred locations to access healthy foods. Gardens and farmers markets were also mentioned.



In Robeson County grocery stores and senior service facilities were the most preferred locations to access healthy foods. Churches were also mentioned as sources of healthy foods.

Challenges affecting healthy food access

According to field notes from group discussions and the answers listed in Post-It sheets, the following are the most salient challenges constraining local community members' ability to access healthy foods:

- Fresh and healthy food is not affordable.
- There is a scarcity of access points with fresh and healthy food.
- Access points with fresh and healthy food are far away and not conveniently located (long drive for rural residents, too long to walk for public housing residents)
- The hours of operation of access points with fresh and healthy food are few and/or inconvenient.
- There is a lack of pre-prepared options of healthy food available for purchase.

- There is a lack of technical knowledge and labor (cited as volunteers) for community gardens, so they are not functioning or productive.
- There are some healthy food/nutrition resources but they are disconnected from community needs and preferences.
- There is a particular lack of resources to engage Spanish-speaking populations.

Participants' ideas to improve healthy food access

Our team recorded participants' ideas for improving healthy food access in their communities, and then we took notes about the ensuing discussion. The input was analyzed to identify themes, which is summarized and organized in Table 1.

Table 1: Annotated ideas to improve healthy food access

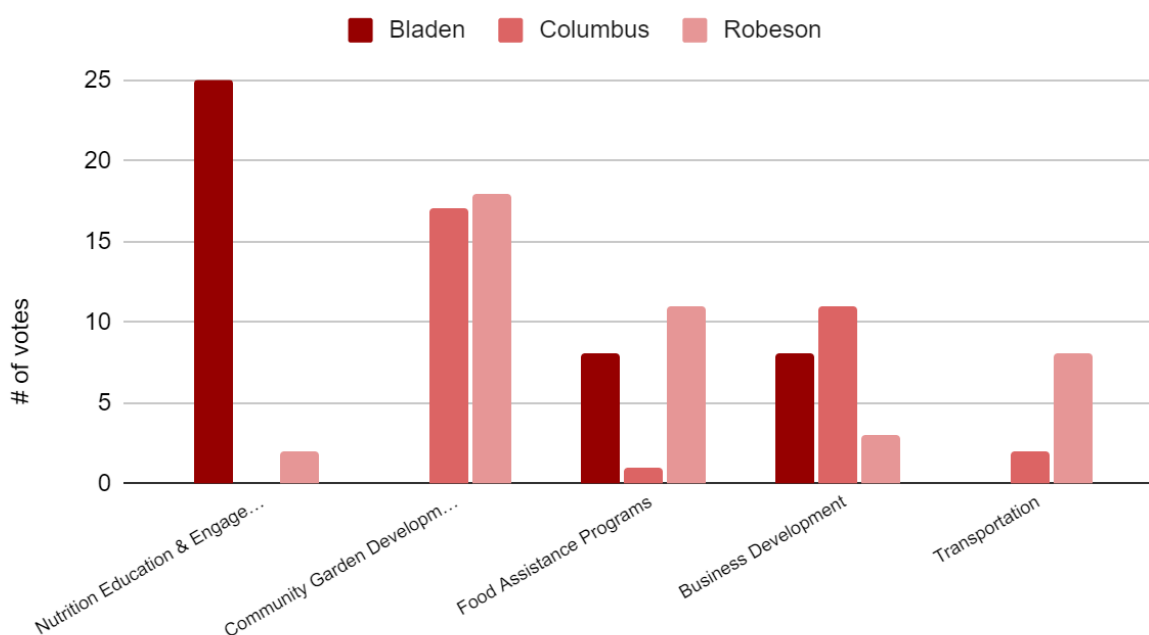
Improvement Themes	Examples of Place-based Improvement Ideas
Nutrition Education and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition and budgeting education • Inclusive and increased communication of existing nutrition and local food resources • Inclusive and increased youth education programs
Community Garden Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New and existing community garden development, emphasis on Tribal and Spanish-speaking communities • Soil improvement education • Food Production, seed saving, marketing education • Food Production and season extension equipment • Raised beds for elderly • After-school and summer youth garden opportunities • Volunteer recruitment and management
Food Assistance Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and network existing or new food pantries • Increase SNAP-EBT, Senior voucher, and UCard acceptance for food at existing farmers' markets and mobile markets • Inclusive and increased pre-made meals for youth
Business Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving product variety, hours of operation, and farmer involvement of existing farmers markets • Mobile market business development, consider packaging sizes for single and older adults, foods that compliment medications • Pre-made meals business development • Meal delivery business development • Develop inclusive shared use kitchen spaces for value-added and traditional foods

Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage health-related transportation resources to transport healthy food or bring people to markets • Develop new multi-purpose healthy food access points • Public transportation and individual ride-sharing transportation development
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It is of note that participants' commitment to youth engagement and development is very salient in ideas related to Nutrition Education, Community Garden Development, and Food Assistance Programs. Accordingly, next steps in devising programs and strategies related to nutrition education, community gardens and food assistance should include insights from youth development community stakeholders and specialists.

Figure 2 illustrates the number of votes each type of healthy food access improvement idea received from participants. The figure shows that nutrition education ideas were highly favored among participants from Bladen County. Community garden development was prioritized in Columbus and Robeson Counties, with particular interest from the tribal members in those counties. Innovative small business models devoted to creating healthy food access were mentioned in all counties. Fieldnotes from these community cafe meetings suggest that frugal business solutions, or businesses requiring low initial investment, to improve access are favored by local income-scarce and/or food insecure community members while decision-makers tend to assume that these community members make poor food decisions due to lack of education. These findings suggest that there might be a need to educate local decision-makers about the factors that affect nutrition decisions among low-resource communities.

Figure 2. Main themes of ideas to improve healthy food access



Overall lessons learned

- Community members from under-resourced communities tend to buy food in grocery stores, some foregoing the purchase of high price items with the hope to access them from food assistance programs.
- Community members are interested in buying healthy foods, and they understand that good nutrition can be beneficial; however their access to healthy food is constrained by its higher price, lack of availability in convenient locations, and lack of transportation.
- Community members are aware of community-based healthy food access points like roadside farm stands, farmers markets and community gardens; however, their location, hours of operation, and prices can be less preferred.
- Community members, especially tribal members, are interested in building community and accessing healthy food in community gardens, and they are willing to contribute with volunteer labor; however, they feel that they need support to build sustainable agricultural skills needed to run a successful garden.
- Community members indicate that healthy food is expensive, food assistance programs often do not have fresh produce, and some of the existing small-scale food companies have unaffordable prices for healthy and local foods.
- Among under-resourced communities, Spanish-speaking community members experience a high level of healthy foods access constraints due to limited information and outreach in Spanish, lack of culturally-appropriate options, their vulnerable socio-political status, and their income uncertainty.
- Community members identify the need for innovative small businesses and improvements in existing businesses and programs that could address their difficulties in accessing healthy food (e.g. pre-made meals); and they emphasize the need to involve youth in many of those initiatives.

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