

CASE STUDY: A TASTE OF CHANGE: ASSESSING A COMMUNITY- UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP'S HOLISTIC APPROACH TO TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY



CONTRIBUTORS

This project and case study materials report on a community-university partnership seeking to design an innovative retail solution to decades of limited food access in West Charlotte. In the spirit of co-ownership of knowledge produced in this project, all project partners (community leaders, academic researchers, student research assistants) are listed (in alphabetical order) as contributors to the case study (with their permission).

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INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, there are many neighborhoods that lack reliable and affordable access to fresh and nutritious food. West Charlotte has similarly experienced disinvestment in food retail and high rates of food insecurity for decades. Community leaders, local officials, organizations, and others have made significant efforts in the past decades to address this challenge. In 2021, a strategic community-university partnership (dubbed a Community Innovation Incubator) sought to design a holistic retail solution grounded in the co-production of knowledge, tangible solutions, and shared power.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Case Study Objectives
- Case Narrative
 - Background on Food (in) Access and Resistance in West Charlotte
 - Community Innovation Incubator
 - Limitations
 - Outcomes
- Recommendations
- Conclusion
- References

OBJECTIVE

This case study describes the Community Innovation Incubator (CII) approach in order to:

- Provide a framework in which community leaders and university researchers collaborate as equal partners in addressing community challenges;
- Share a guide for partnerships to use in co-designing tangible and holistic solutions to community challenges; and
- Demonstrate principles of shared power and action research in practice.

CASE NARRATIVE

Residents in neighborhoods in West Charlotte have faced food access challenges for decades despite many efforts from community leaders to improve local food systems. A long history of racial segregation and discrimination, stalled projects, and limited development and commercial investment has produced an environment characterized by limited access to affordable and nutritious food. This case study describes a community-university partnership developed to address these challenges by designing a community-owned food cooperative. The main goal of the partnership is to address residents' need to access healthy and affordable food.

The partnership relied on an action research methodology for guiding a collaboration between community leaders and faculty researchers. This means that expertise, experience, and knowledge from community leaders and researchers were equally valued in pursuit of a tangible solution. The project included three phases: Laying the Foundation, Designing the Intervention, and Building the Plan (described further below). Throughout these phases, the CII prioritized learning from community leaders and residents, researching existing models, analyzing key considerations and market trends, and identifying creative solutions as well as different sources of funding. Outcomes from the community-university partnership included a design and implementation plan for a food cooperative model that can bring health, wealth and social equity to West Charlotte. This case study provides an illustrative example of a multidisciplinary, community-university action research project.

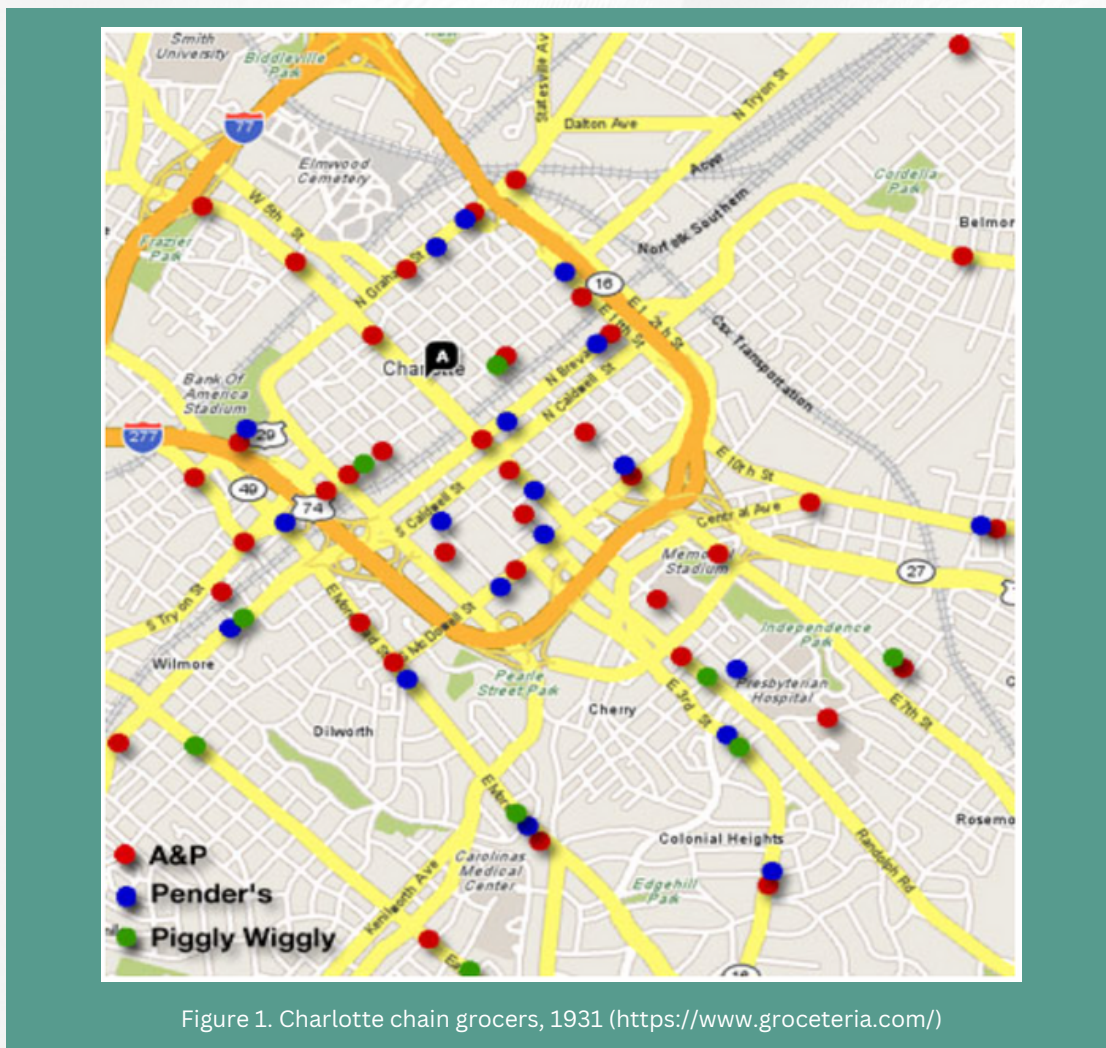


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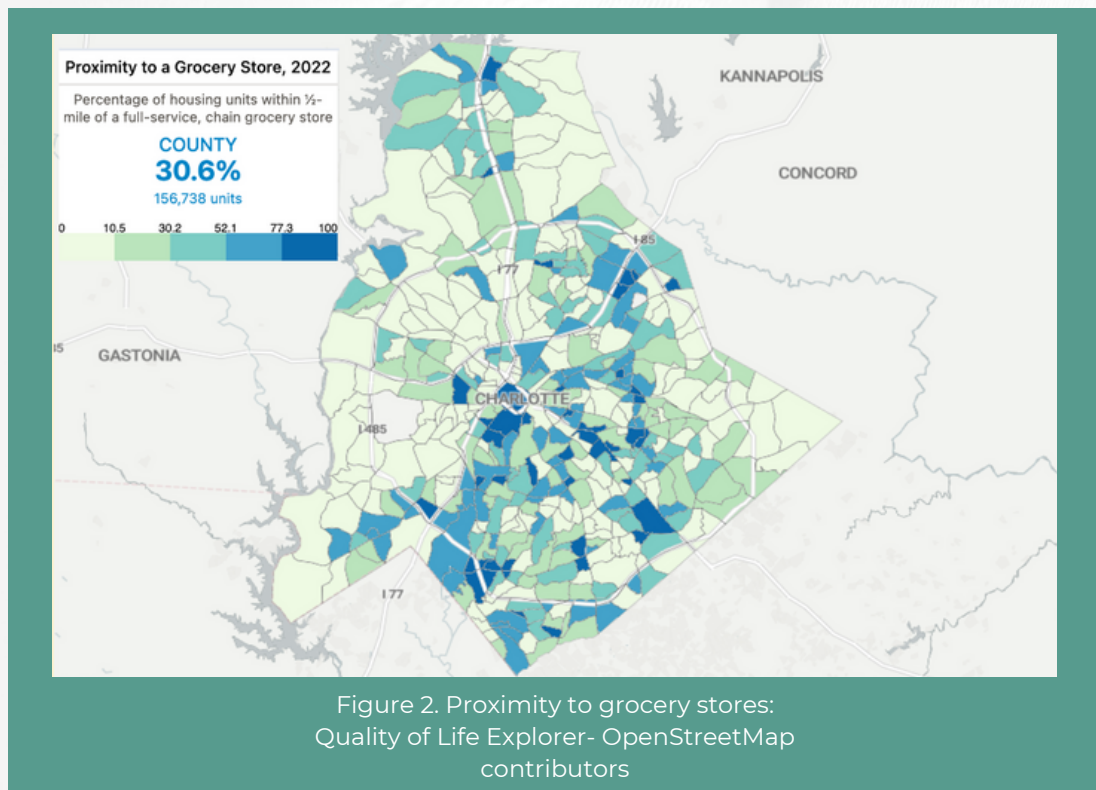
BACKGROUND

Almost 15% of Mecklenburg County households are considered food insecure, meaning they lack reliable access to nutritious food (Sands 2023). Access to healthy food can reduce preventable diseases, such as obesity, for which people of color experience more risk (Johnson et al., 2016). While not absolute, full-service grocery stores have the potential to provide access to a greater variety of affordable and healthy foods than convenience stores and can help to facilitate healthy lifestyles and dietary choices.

However, Charlotte's residents have contended with uneven access to grocery stores throughout its history. As early as 1931, grocery stores were only available in certain areas of Charlotte. A chain store named The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (A&P) had 40 small "economy stores" throughout Charlotte, although half of the stores were located downtown "within ten blocks of Trade and Tryon Streets" and only two stores were located in the Westside/Five Points area (Grocereria).



While some neighborhoods are home to multiple grocery stores competing for consumer dollars, residents in West Charlotte continue to have limited access. Figure 2 shows the percentage of housing units that are located within a half mile of a full-service chain grocery store in the Charlotte area. It demonstrates that West Charlotte residents have significantly less access to grocery stores than other areas of Mecklenburg county. This challenge is not unique to Charlotte. A recent Brookings Institution report found that premium grocery stores were less likely to locate in majority Black neighborhoods regardless of neighborhood income (Rowlands et al. 2023).



In response to these challenges, community leaders in West Charlotte built and advocated for significant infrastructure and resource investments to improve food access. For example, the Seeds for Change urban farm, created by the West Blvd Neighborhood Coalition in 2016, provides fresh produce alongside leadership and training programs for neighborhood youth. Additionally, the Historic West End Partners partnered with the National Main Street Center to reimagine a commercial area in West Charlotte, including a market study determining what fresh food options might be feasible (Israel, 2021a). Alongside efforts to request grocery stores when shopping centers have been (re)built, ongoing campaigns sought to bring additional food resources to the neighborhood. This includes the creation of the Rosa Parks Farmers' Market and seeking support to launch the Three Sisters Market (which served as a starting point for this project). Many of these efforts continue to bring fresh produce into the area.

The local government also sought solutions to uneven food access across the city. According to a recent Charlotte Observer article (Muccigrosso and Off 2023), in 2020, Mecklenburg County commissioners found food deserts to be unacceptable and planned to collaborate with chain retail grocers open in low-income neighborhoods by providing the grocery retailers with financial incentives. However, Harris Teeter and Publix didn't find this opportunity to be sufficiently profitable due to expectations of profitability in a neighborhood with low income and population density. The collaborative built on, learned from, and responded to community and local government's previous efforts to address food access challenges in West Charlotte.

COMMUNITY INNOVATION INCUBATOR

In response to the long-standing and critical need discussed above, a partnership, named the Community Innovation Incubator (CII), came together to create a viable solution that not only addresses the lack of food access, but also seeks to improve health, social, and wealth equity in West Charlotte. The 15 member collaborative included community leaders from West Charlotte and interdisciplinary researchers from two local universities, Johnson C. Smith University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Figure 3). The CII was supported by a grant from the Mecklenburg County government. In a presentation to the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners, County Manager Dena Diorio reflected on the project as a complement to the county's ongoing efforts to address food insecurity: "This is a new approach that hasn't been done before, and we think it will bear some really good fruit" (CHARP 2021).

FIGURE 3. COMMUNITY INNOVATION INCUBATOR PARTICIPANTS

Community Leaders

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This project was grounded in an action research approach. Action research is a strategy of engaging experts with diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and resources to address complex social issues such as lack of access to fresh food (Lasker & Weiss 2003). This differs from traditional research methods that primarily seek to produce knowledge and information. Action research is a method that co-produces knowledge in the service of creating change.

The CII proceeded through three distinct phases: Laying the Foundation, Designing the Intervention, and Building the Plan. Throughout the project, the group met regularly but also separated into smaller working groups to address different project tasks.

Laying the Foundation

The first phase focused on identifying existing expertise and establishing norms for collaboration. This included establishing “ground rules” that were codified in a memorandum of understanding to guide the group and indicate commitment and responsibilities for each member (see Figure 4). Through this MOU, the group initially addressed concerns about ownership of work produced from the project and processes for presenting aspects of the project to different audiences (including case studies like this).

During the first phase, the group focused on six areas for gathering information and developing strategies: Market analysis, Business scope, Business operations, and community education and engagement. Compiling existing information in these areas allowed the group to lay the foundation for the overall project by gaining understanding of the food retail market of West Charlotte, analyzing methods, defining needed components including structures, potential partners, and identifying products, and determining the aspects needed to effectively manage the food enterprise. To this end, phase 1 included a scan of over 20 food retail enterprises from across the country to provide design inspiration, market trends, key considerations, and best practices. Outlining essential educational and engagement elements to holistically support residents, determining the optimal location and layout, and identifying potential sources of financial investment were part of this initial phase.

Figure 4. Memorandum Of Understanding Key Elements
Maintaining the well-being of the residents as our top priority
Being truthful, open, and genuine in every interaction with one another
Only pursuing avenues that are fruitful
Establishing innovation on genuine economic empowerment and the advancement of community wealth
Cultivating a strong relationship between the community, universities, and county, emphasizing power-sharing to ensure the community's voice is acknowledged and valued

Designing the Intervention

The second phase focused on designing the food retail intervention. Through six working groups (Figure 5), team members gathered information, consulted with experts and potential partners, and began defining the necessary conditions for creating a retail innovation that will contribute to health, social, and wealth equity in West Charlotte.

Figure 5. Phase Two Working Groups

- Market analysis
- Business scope
- Business operations
- Community education and engagement
- Place and facilities
- Investment

In this phase, the team engaged with 40+ community members and industry leaders to discuss food insecurity concerns, gain neighborhood insight, and learn from experts in food retail. This included field trips to other communities creating innovative food retail solutions in Chapel Hill, Raleigh, Hillsboro, and Carrboro. In pursuit of making the innovation a reality, team members also identified different potential sources of funding by reaching out to government agencies, local foundations, businesses, and other organizations.

Phase Two concluded with two, four-hour design sessions in which the entire project team, led by consultants trained in Results Based Facilitation, came to a consensus on the broad parameters of the innovation, potential partners and resources needed to implement it, and a strategy for creating the implementation plan in Phase Three.

Building the Plan

Once the foundation and design concepts were established, the group focused on an execution strategy. The transition was made from overarching ideas to specific, well-defined areas centered around operations and implementation. Again, the team formed smaller working groups to focus on designing an implementation plan for each of the identified components of the retail innovation (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Phase Three Working Groups

- Fresh produce supply chain
- Non-perishables and quality meat
- Healthy prepared food
- Education, programming, and placemaking
- Direct delivery to customers
- Market and Branding
- Place/corridor
- Community engagement and feedback
- Capacity, personnel, and investment

The working groups continued to engage with community residents, retail experts, and potential partners to garner feedback and guidance on the innovation design. In Phase Three, working group members developed an implementation plan for the food retail innovation that would provide affordable fresh produce, non-perishables and quality meat, and healthy prepared foods, both in-store and through delivery models. In addition, the implementation plan identified strategies for education, programming, and placemaking activities to establish the cooperative as a community space promoting health and nutrition. The implementation plan provided strategies for attracting customers from primary, secondary, and affinity markets, designing the layout and location(s), and identifying needed capacity, personnel, and stakeholder investments.

The final deliverable of Phase Three was a report outlining the implementation plan and requesting investments needed to build the food cooperative. This report was presented to the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners and shared widely with potential supporters. Following this phase, work has continued to build the cooperative. Articles of incorporation were filed, a board was established (including community leaders and some university researchers from the CII team), and land and investments have been secured. Importantly, the CII built on and supported efforts by community leaders to create a neighborhood food system grounded in food sovereignty. Few of the ideas identified by the CII were new. Instead, the collaborative validated much of the arguments and ideas of community leaders. While all members of the collaborative joined the CII with an openness to identifying any type of retail solution, existing research, scans of other models, and resident feedback made clear that the food cooperative model is the best solution to the decades-long struggle to improve access to affordable and nutritious food in West Charlotte.

LIMITATIONS OF PARTNERSHIP

As with many projects, there were limitations that had the potential to threaten the success of the project. While different team members brought their own objectives to the project, the group intentionally focused on their common goals and guiding principles which ultimately resulted in overall success of the partnership.

The research was also impacted by a limited timeline for completing the innovation design and report. Due to funding constraints, the group initially had 6 months to connect, organize, plan, research, and create a detailed implementation for potential stakeholders. Many participants reflected on the limitations in being able to garner greater resident input and buy in within this short timeframe. The team also recognized, however, a need to move quickly to address a challenge facing residents for decades. By dividing the large group into smaller groups, specific tasks were able to be accomplished.

Finally, the Covid-19 Pandemic also created limitations during the project. The CII began its work in December 2020, at which time many organizations and residents were practicing social distancing in order to prevent spreading the virus. This meant that the group primarily met via zoom. Although some may view virtual meetings as more efficient, it created barriers to establishing natural connections within the group and limited access to connecting with residents. However, connecting online provided the convenience of being able to join conversations during busy days from anywhere. One group member reflected on the experience by stating “It's a challenge, it is difficult. You have to be open minded, flexible, and you have to be working for the good of the project”.

OUTCOMES

The expected outcome of this partnership and project is the creation of a full-service food cooperative that will have a significant positive impact on the health, social and economic status of residents in West Charlotte. By improving access to affordable fresh food, the group aims to improve eating habits, decrease adverse health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and other food consumption related diseases, and foster community engagement through local collaborations and educational initiatives. Through future surveys and data collection, the group hopes to show improvements in these areas as well as establish the effectiveness of the food cooperative in West Charlotte. Furthermore, the group's long-term vision for the food co-op is to have systemic impact and serves as an impetus in West Charlotte that increases economic and health equity in the area based on a community food ecosystem (Figure 7), as explained by community leader Rickey Hall: "This is an effort around community wealth-building that improves the quality of life for the residents." (Israel, 2021a).

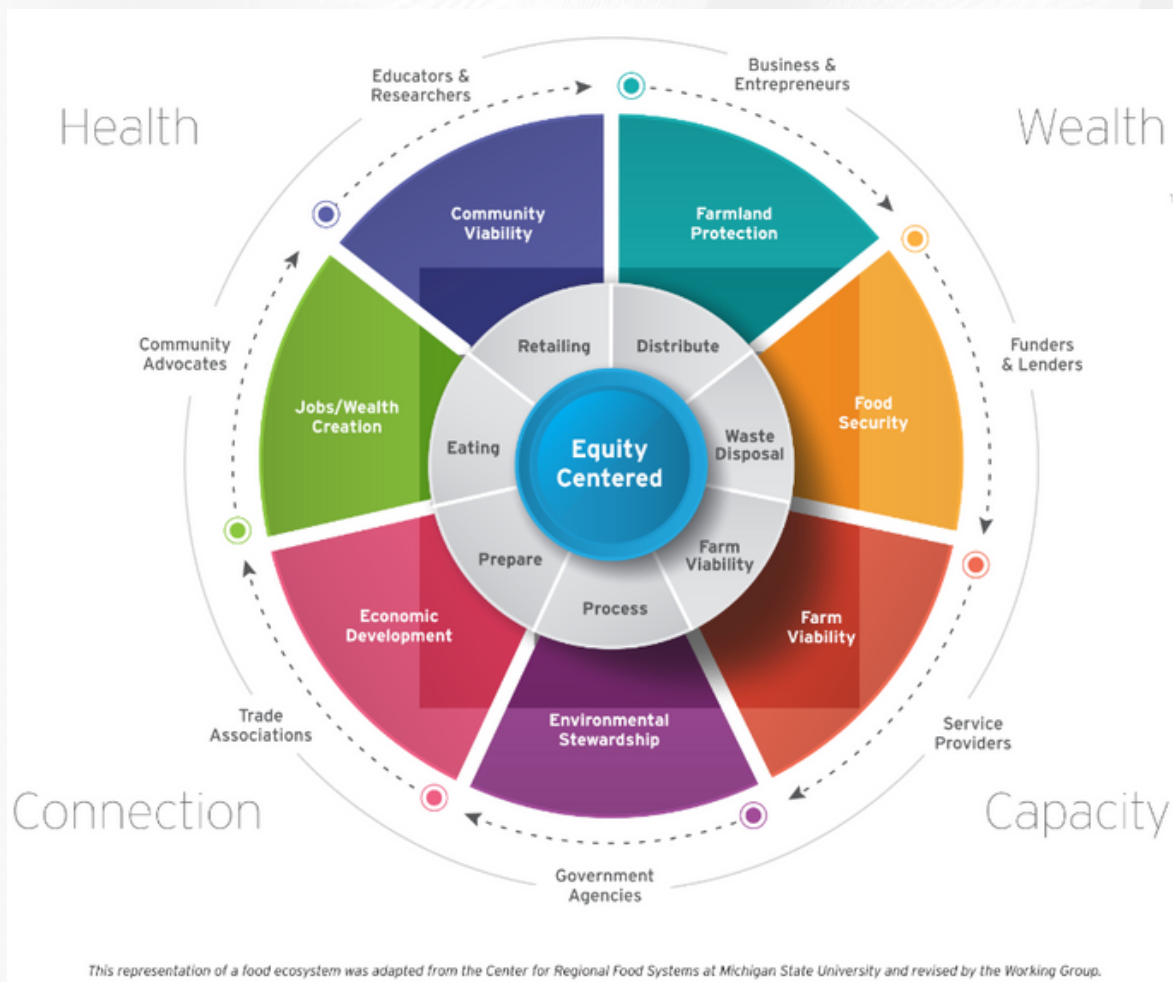


FIGURE 7. A HOLISTIC COMMUNITY FOOD ECOSYSTEM

Further anticipated results that may emerge from the co-op include a demand for new technologies such as hydroponic farms, hands-on educational agricultural programs, community-based nutrition education programs, innovative delivery programs, and providing a central community gathering location. It is expected that these outcomes will produce economic benefits for residents such as employment and wealth-building opportunities, increased entrepreneurship from people of color, and increased demand for urban farms. Other non-linear results include increase in health outcomes and social equity of West Charlotte residents as a result of access to fresh, healthy food options.

Beyond the co-op in West Charlotte, this case study is informative as an action research model emphasizing the value of co-producing knowledge from a diverse range of disciplines and positionalities and the team's shared commitment to designing a tangible solution. Byron White, Associate Provost of the Office of Urban Research and Community Engagement at UNC Charlotte, explained this in a presentation to the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners: "This is around a collaborative interaction between researchers, faculty, students, community leaders, residents and others. Everyone's a peer. Everyone brings expertise and learns from one another" (CHARP 2021). More traditional community-university partnerships can create a hierarchy of power by positioning faculty researchers as experts and assigning community participants as research subjects from whom data can be extracted. This project instead operated from a shared power perspective in which all members provided valuable expertise in the co-creation of research. To accomplish this, the team intentionally prioritized community leaders through processes of transparency, accountability, and establishing ground rules.

Further, the shared objective of achieving tangible solutions was evident throughout the project. White emphasized that the objective was to design "something exciting, something bold, something really innovative that captures the community's imagination and also has the opportunity to be a viable business" (Israel 2021b). This community-university project is innovative for its intentional focus on shared power, horizontal leadership, highlighting community expertise, making a specific proposal to stakeholders, and the consistent effort to create a tangible solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on reflections from project partners and the ongoing momentum of the project, there were a few reasons for the success of the project that other community-university partnerships could adopt to tackle similar challenges. An intentional focus on shared power, collaborative and horizontal leadership, establishing trust by building relationships, and open communication are key components to the success of this project. Additionally, leveraging individual strengths and expertise, learning from the community and other groups, and having facilitators with a non-biased approach to guide meetings and track progress were also instrumental.

CONCLUSION

Addressing decades of disinvestment in food retail requires a collaborative approach engaging residents, community leaders, community organizations, local stakeholders and investors, and researchers from multiple disciplines. This case study provides an example of one such collaboration through which a community-university partnership utilized an action research approach grounded in shared power, co-producing knowledge, building on existing efforts, and a commitment to creating holistic solutions. This case study can serve as a framework for future community-university collaborations seeking to create tangible social change.

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