

“All Bulk Everything: Opportunities and Barriers for Access to ‘Good’ Food with a Focus on Participation by Low-income Communities”

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Executive Summary:

This paper addresses the topic of bulk food buying clubs (BFBCs) as a potential means to bring cheap “good” (healthy, sustainable, organic, and local) food to low-income urban areas. The questions researched are: Can BFBCs be effective models to address food security issues in urban areas? If not, why are they not effective models? What are problems arise and how can they be solved? Have BFBCs tried and failed to address these issues? If so, why did they fail? Research was gathered through the use of interviews and surveys conducted in Portland, Seattle, and Los Angeles. Interviewees consisted of those involved in BFBCs, anti-hunger groups, and city food policy councils and surveys were distributed to other BFBC members through interviewees.

Survey and interview responses and case studies of four Portland BFBCs showed that the majority of BFBCs are not accessible to low-income households or people of color. Most respondents reported that the availability of affordable, “good” food was what was best about their BFBCs. The inability to consistently recruit volunteers was the most common problem. Additionally, interviewees said that low-income BFBCs had their own specific problems, including the inability to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and the lack of sufficient dedicated members with enough time to organizing the ordering. In response to these findings, this paper recommends ways in which BFBCs can become more accessible to low-income residents. These include suggestions on ways to accept SNAP benefits, to monetarily compensate the volunteers who organize the most time-consuming managerial aspects, and/or to partner with community organizations in order to lift some of the volunteer requirements.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Personal History:

During my sophomore year at Occidental College my interest in food led me to help found the Food Justice Co-op House. The FJ Co-op house strives to be an example of how college students can eat justly and sustainably. This stemmed from discussions I had with friends regarding the fact that college students often claim to be too poor to afford “good” food. I define good food as food that is healthy, sustainable, organic, and locally-grown. While it is sometimes difficult to balance the purchase of “good” food with a limited budget, our house strives to show that it is indeed possible. Academically, I am interested in researching these same ideas of balancing “good” food and affordability.

I am also the Product Purchasing and Inventory Manager at the Green Bean Coffee Lounge. One of the pillars of our student-run establishment is sustainability in every aspect of business. This means that as the manager in charge of products I am constantly searching for more sustainable and local options. It has been interesting for me to focus on food justice issues on both a personal and professional level. Many of the same concerns arise about the affordability of “good” foods in both aspects of my life.

I have been exposed to alternative food systems my whole life. When I was a young child living in Portland, Oregon my family was a member of a bulk food buying club (BFBC). I only have vague memories of the process, but I do remember that going to splits (events where food is divided up and distributed among members) was always very exciting; it was a social occasion. Growing up in a single-parent household, my family has always been low-income and has not always been food secure. And has at some times used both the local food bank and food stamps. In other words, when I refer to food security I mean, “all people

obtaining a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through non-emergency (or conventional) food sources at all times.”¹ However, my mother grew up in a solidly middle-class family that was part of the cooperative housing movement and therefore had participated in what some would consider an alternative food culture, something that is often seen as inaccessible to many. Because of this, I grew up in a household that not only utilized emergency food systems and entitlement programs but also used BFBCs, co-ops, and other alternative ways of lowering food costs.

When I was six my family moved from Portland to Vashon Island, Washington, a rural island community that is a twenty-minute ferryboat ride away from Seattle. Because of its isolated nature, Vashon has been unable to maintain a buying club or co-op. My family was therefore no longer able to utilize these means of lowering food costs. We were forced to rely more heavily on the local food bank and food stamps after the move, especially because food costs were higher on the island due to its physical separation from the mainland. However, my mother insisted on only taking items from the food bank that she would have chosen to purchase from the store. Her decision meant that my brother and I were prevented from getting unhealthy food from the food bank even though it was freely available to us. Not all people have been as lucky as I to have health-nut moms though. It is because of these experiences that I was drawn to my research question: can BFBCs be effective models to address food security issues in urban areas? If not, why are they not effective models? What are the problems that arise and how can they be solved? Have BFBCs tried and failed to address those issues? If so, why did they fail?

¹ Linda Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Urban Planning Department, 1993).

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Food Movement Strategies Around Healthy Food Access:

There are many terms connected to the food movement. These include food justice movement, food safety net, emergency food system, anti-hunger movement, community food system, and alternative food movement. While these categories sometimes overlap they also represent different theories about how to look at the food issues and their potential. “Food justice” refers to the study of the food system as a whole. It focuses specifically on the supply chain from a big picture perspective.² The term implies a prioritization of low-income households and people of color who are disproportionately affected by problems of food access.

The “food safety net” includes federal entitlement programs designed to ensure access to food for individuals who do not currently have access. Examples include the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC),³ and free and reduced school lunch programs.⁴ These programs give money or food directly to participants. In 2012 there were approximately 46.6 million individuals and 22.3 million households participating in the SNAP program nationally, which is equal to \$74.6 billion distributed to those in need.⁵ In California there were approximately 3.9 million individuals and 1.8 million household receiving \$7.1 billion worth of benefits; in Oregon there were approximately 815,221

² Occidental College Urban and Environmental Institute, “Food Justice,” *Food Justice: a Book About an Emerging Movement* by Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, n.d., http://www.foodjusticebook.org/?page_id=6.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, “About FNS,” Governmental, *United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service*, accessed March 3, 2013, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/about-fns>.

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, “National School Lunch Program (NSLP),” *USDA Food and Nutrition Services*, n.d., <http://www.fns.usda.gov/slp>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, “Program Data: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” Governmental, *United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service*, February 5, 2013, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/snapmain.htm>.

individuals and 447,338 households receiving \$1,253,656,139.⁶ As is visible in the way money is allocated to individual heads of families, these programs focus on solutions that make food more accessible on an individual level using government resources.

The “emergency food system” (EFS) is similar to food safety nets in that it works to fix the problem of food insecurity on an individual level. However, it is a private charitable system rather than a service provided by the government. Food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens are categorized as part of the emergency food system.⁷ The emergency food system is comprised of non-profits designed to provide donated food to those who would otherwise not have access. These individuals often do not receive SNAP, WIC, or other entitlement benefits.⁸ Often because they do not qualify (they are undocumented immigrants, they have hit the limit on how much they can receive, etc),⁹ they do not know how to apply,¹⁰ or they are not aware of the programs at all.¹¹

Both food safety net programs and the emergency food system are part of the “anti-hunger movement.” This movement tends to focus on ways in which those affected by food insecurity can obtain food as individuals or families. One problem with this movement is that “the burden for ending hunger has been shifted to the intervener, namely the federal government and private food banks. The larger community and with it, a larger range of solutions and interrelationships, do not participate.”¹² Since both types of programs focus on solutions for individuals they do not take into account the greater problems in different

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Linda Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*, 25.

⁸ Michael Flood, LA Regional Food Bank, March 1, 2013.

⁹ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, “Eligibility: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” *United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service*, February 28, 2013, http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/applicant_recipients/eligibility.htm.

¹⁰ Flood, LA Regional Food Bank.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mark Winne, *Community Food Security: Promoting Food Security and Building Healthy Systems* (Santa Fe, NM: Food Society Policy Fellowship, n.d.).

communities that cause those individuals to be hungry. Furthermore, the emergency food system, specifically, is slowly morphing into “a ‘conventional’ food source, rather than an outlet for times of crisis.”¹³ Not only are certain communities left out of the solution-finding process, but what is supposed to be a temporary solution until families or individuals can get back on their feet is becoming something that many households depend on permanently. As a result, both the food safety net and emergency food system miss out on many opportunities to permanently decrease the number of hungry people. Because of this, “the long-term solution to hunger is not found in the strengthening of the emergency food system.”¹⁴ Alternatively, a more holistic approach must be taken to increase food security.

The Community Food Security (CFS) approach, in contrast to anti-hunger strategies, focuses on increasing food security and access for entire communities rather than giving temporary assistance to individual people or households. CFS works to create “a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance, social justice, and democratic decision-making.”¹⁵ Examples of CFS strategies include “farmers’ markets, federal food assistance program outreach, community gardens, youth food and agriculture programs... food system planning and food policy councils, nutrition education and health promotion strategies, transportation projects, farm-to-school projects, economic development activities, and a range of public education and awareness campaigns.”¹⁶ These programs attempt to bring healthy food to low-income communities

¹³ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Winne, *Community Food Security: Promoting Food Security and Building Healthy Systems*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

with limited access, while increase education about “good” foods.¹⁷ These programs and organizations are only some of the many ways in which CFS works to increase access to food and nutrition education in a more permanent, community-oriented way.

The alternative food movement is primarily concerned with how food is grown and specifically focuses on healthy eating. Examples of this movement include Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) and farmers’ markets. Since the movement concentrates on the consumers of food and does not emphasize the community as a whole, the alternative food movement can become exclusive. CSAs and farmers’ markets “tend to develop and thrive in particular socioeconomic environments that are likely to be very similar from place to place”¹⁸ and are generally not low-income environments. These programs are often perceived as middle-class amenities to increase access to local, organic, sustainable foods and are often accused of being an elite movement.

While alternative food movement programs sometimes reduce the price of healthy food, even that lower price is still more than what many unhealthy foods cost.¹⁹ Therefore, ventures such as farmers’ market SNAP outreach programs, which encourage the use of SNAP benefits, are necessary in order to make otherwise unavailable avenues of obtain good food available to low-income households. This is important, as researchers at Ohio State University have found that “Less than half of elderly men and women and WIC children get their recommended intake of fruits and vegetables per day. Studies show that recipients of WIC and senior food vouchers who participate in the Farmers’ Market

¹⁷ Julie Guthman, *Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practices* (Department of Community Studies, University of California Santa Cruz, 2008), 432.

¹⁸ Julie Guthman, Amy W. Morris, and Patricia Allen, “Squaring Farm Security and Food Security in Two Types of Alternative Food Institutions,” *Rural Sociology* 71, no. 4 (December 2006): 665.

¹⁹ Chris Musser, Eastside Buying Club, January 7, 2013.

Nutrition Program... experience an increase in their fruit and vegetable consumption.”²⁰ By using outreach to increase awareness of programs, farmers’ market produce can be made more available to the whole community. In this way, alternative food advocacy can use CFS strategies to reorient the movement and to make its food options available to low-income communities.

2.2 Definition of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

Bulk Food Buying Clubs, in the context of this research project, are informally organized groups of individuals who jointly order food through wholesalers, farms, and other means. According to a UCLA Urban Planning study, the “fundamental concept underlying the buying club is that consumers can save money by pooling orders to take advantage of volume discounts.”²¹ Unlike co-ops with a retail location, BFBCs generally use members’ homes or community spaces as meeting places,²² where the deliveries are divided up among members (these meetings are referred to as “splits”). While some BFBCs do become large enough to warrant renting a warehouse, most do not. BFBCs organize their food purchases in different ways.²³ Some use a “pre-order” method, in which members specify what they want and pay beforehand.²⁴ Other BFBCs have members pay when they come to the split to collect their food.²⁵

While the method of organization varies from club to club, all BFBCs are based on the idea that members can buy food more cheaply by jointly ordering large quantities

²⁰ Stephanie Lung, *EBT, WIC, and Senior Coupons: Underutilized at Local Farmer’s Markets* (The Ohio State University, n.d.), 1.

²¹ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*.

²² Rita Irwin, “Belonging to a Food Buying Club,” *Natural Life*, October 1998.

²³ Yes We Can!, “How to Create a Neighborhood Food-Buying Club - W.K. Kellogg Foundation” (W.K Kellogg Foundation), accessed October 8, 2012.

²⁴ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*.

²⁵ Kathleen Mitchell, Lents Buying Club, January 8, 2013.

directly from wholesalers or farmers. This reduces costs by eliminating the middleman (grocery stores)²⁶ and removes any other additional costs incurred by retail stores, such as labor, other overhead, and the need to make a profit, which are ultimately transferred to the consumer in product pricing. Because BFBCs rely so heavily on volunteer labor, space, and supplies, those involved must be invested in them. Therefore, BFBCs not only build community but also allow participants to effect positive change in their own lives.

2.3 Formation and Sustainability to Form Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

People form BFBCs because they have a communal or personal need that is not met existing organizations.²⁷ Because of this, BFBCs can only survive if they meet the needs of the community.²⁸ It is, then, important that BFBCs are formed and controlled by the community. Furthermore, as “community builders”²⁹ BFBCs must involve the entire community to survive;³⁰ they cannot be run by only a few members. Many BFBCs ultimately fail because they rely too heavily on a few volunteers who eventually burn out, leaving the BFBC without members who are able or willing to organize the buys and splits. Because of this a BFBC can only truly be an asset to a community if the entire community is fully invested in it.

²⁶ Caryn Eve Murray, “FOOD FIGHT / Co-ops from Decades Past Meet Harsh Competition of the '90s: [NASSAU AND SUFFOLK Edition],” *Newsday*, October 13, 1997, sec. Business, <http://0-search.proquest.com.oasys.lib.oxy.edu/socialsciences/docview/279015808/139A49F55AD4F8B72B3/22?acountid=12935>.

²⁷ Philip J. Dodge, *A New Look at Cooperatives*, 1st ed., Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 487 (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1972), 21.

²⁸ Philip J. Dodge, *People Help Themselves Through Cooperatives*, 1st ed, Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 358 (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1964), 8.

²⁹ Caryn Eve Murray, “FOOD FIGHT / Co-ops from Decades Past Meet Harsh Competition of the '90s: [NASSAU AND SUFFOLK Edition],” *Newsday* (Long Island, NY, October 13, 1997), sec. Business, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

2.4 History of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

Many of the first BFBCs were rural rather than urban. Rural communities made up of small towns and farms were physically spread out from one another and thus had limited options in regards to where residents could buy food, which gave them a strong need for more venues selling food.³¹ Rural BFBCs were formed because community members needed a way to buy certain products because they did not have any other options. Urban BFBCs, on the other hand, were often formed out of the community's need for more variety. Community members wanted to be able to purchase foods for lower prices, of a better quality, or from a place with more availability or dependability.³² They did not, however, have a need that was as great or as pressing as the need in rural areas. This is because there were places from which to purchase these foods already; there just were not as many options as residents wanted.

Need is not the only reason why BFBCs were started. BFBCs are set apart from other food purchasing systems in that they have an aspect of self-help. This is important because, according to the CFS movement, "all participants in the food system have the right to participate in decisions that affect the availability, cost, price, quality, and attributes of their food."³³ Both low-income communities and affluent ones are able to use BFBCs as self-help tools to directly affect availability, cost, and quality.³⁴ BFBCs require participating community members to come together and work to obtain the results that they want in a BFBC. BFBC members are able to take steps that better their own food purchasing abilities

³¹ Wickstrom, *The food conspiracy cookbook; how to start a neighborhood buying club and eat cheaply*, 1.

³² Elizabeth A. Schiferl and Robert A. Boynton, "A Comparative Performance Analysis of New Wave Food Cooperatives and Private Food Stores," *The Journal of Consumer Affairs (pre-1986)* 17, no. 2 (Winter 1983): 2.

³³ Winne, *Community Food Security: Promoting Food Security and Building Healthy Systems*, 3.

³⁴ Dodge, *A New Look at Cooperatives*, 8.

no matter what their socioeconomic status. In this way, BFBCs are tools for communities to use in order to help themselves.

BFBCs are not, as some seem to naively believe, “magic fixes”³⁵ for all community issues. They require time, effort, and (as mentioned above) continued need. During the beginnings of the BFBC and cooperative movements in the 1960s and 1970s those involved in the movements were often overly optimistic about the abilities of BFBCs to act as a panacea. Pamphlets³⁶ and books³⁷ were written detailing the different ways that BFBCs could be organized to improve all aspects of life but the movement did not take root as deeply as many of these pamphlets and books argued they could, leaving people without the results they were expecting.

The movement did not solidify for many different reasons. One explanation was that “internal conflicts, a changing social environment and an increasingly competitive food industry” made it difficult for the “the cooperative movement of the 1960s and 1970s... [to] be sustained.”³⁸ This led to “the decline of the cooperatives in the 1980s,” which “demonstrates all too clearly that idealism must be integrated with economic realism and sound management if co-ops are to survive and multiply.”³⁹ This quote demonstrates the overambitious dreams held by many members of the cooperative and BFBC movement. They hoped the movements would change the entire system and therefore may not have implemented all of the logistical pieces that were necessary in order to create a system that could sustain itself.

³⁵ Ronald Cotterill, “Declining Competition in Food Retailing: An Opportunity for Consumer Food Cooperatives?,” *The 12*, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 25.

³⁶ Dodge, *People Help Themselves Through Cooperatives*; Dodge, *A New Look at Cooperatives*.

³⁷ Lois Wickstrom, *The food conspiracy cookbook; how to start a neighborhood buying club and eat cheaply*. (San Francisco: 101 Productions; [distributed by Scribner, New York], 1974).

³⁸ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

The BFBC model did not entirely disappear after its decline during the 1980s: however, the 1990s brought a new wave of BFBCs that sought to learn from the mistakes of those earlier efforts. One example of a nation-wide buying club organization that prospered in the 1990s, which ultimately failed, is SHARE. SHARE was a nation-wide self-help resource exchange program that began in 1983 in the San Diego region because food pantries and food stamps did not seem to be doing enough in fighting hunger. Households paid \$15 for a box of food worth \$30 and each new box was paid for when participants picked up their current box. People were required to do two hours of community service at any place of their choosing in order to participate. This could include baby-sitting for a neighbor, volunteering somewhere, etc.⁴⁰ Agencies and sites signed up for a specific number of boxes, or shares, that they wanted to distribute.⁴¹ In Los Angeles the LA Temple on Crenshaw was a distribution site.⁴² The program served 25,000 households and “calculate[d] the value of its food packages as two or three times what participants pay[ed].”⁴³ The boxes contained typical midwestern foods such as potatoes, other vegetables, and meat. Participants were unable to decide what they wanted in their box and the content did not change based on location. Frank Tamborello, who works with Hunger Action LA, thought this may have been one reason that the program ultimately failed. An attempt to remedy this was Healthy SHARE, a spin-off of SHARE that was operated by unions. However, it did not last for long and ended at about the same time that SHARE did.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Frank Tamborello, Hunger Action LA, February 8, 2013.

⁴¹ Flood, LA Regional Food Bank.

⁴² Tamborello, Hunger Action LA.

⁴³ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*.

⁴⁴ Tamborello, Hunger Action LA.

Another community problem that occurs when programs are developed to increase food access in low-income areas is a lack of communication with the community about its needs. “Alternative [solutions], such as community gardens or produce vans... do not always fit the needs or desires of the residents and may be put in place without gathering resident input.”⁴⁵ This problem highlights the way in which many programs ignore the knowledge that community members have of their own needs. The SHARE program is a prime example. Since the program was nationwide it was impossible for individual communities to decide how to best implement the program to fit their own needs or give community members a say in what foods were available. Instead, the program used a top-down model that excluded those at the bottom from decision-making power. As stated above, this may be why the program ultimately failed. This example illustrates that those attempting to fight hunger often go into areas with general ideas about what is needed but do not include the community members in the more detailed decisions that could make the program function effectively in that specific community.

2.5 Bulk Food Buying Clubs versus Co-ops:

Storefront co-ops differ from BFBCs because they have significantly higher startup costs, continued operating costs, and volunteer need; co-ops, therefore, cannot sell their products as cheaply as BFBCs. While they do not mark up products to make a profit the way traditional grocery stores do, they must mark up their products enough to cover the cost of operating a physical building.⁴⁶ Co-ops therefore need significantly more effort in order to

⁴⁵ Daniel R. Block et al., “Food Sovereignty, Urban Food Access, and Food Activism: Contemplating the Connections Through Examples from Chicago,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 29 (2012): 205.

⁴⁶ Murray, “FOOD FIGHT / Co-ops from Decades Past Meet Harsh Competition of the '90s.”

be successful.⁴⁷ Because of high costs, many BFBCs began as offshoots of storefront food co-ops in the 1960s as the alternative food movement grew and more people wanted access to affordable “good” food.⁴⁸ Today, the opposite occurs: some BFBCs are attempting to save enough money to purchase a physical location and operate as co-ops as they are grow too big to operate as a BFBC.⁴⁹ Therefore, BFBCs were, and are, able to fill a similar need as storefront co-ops but generally much more cheaply and with less labor.

2.6 Historical Positives of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

According to the literature, BFBCs have three main positive attributes that other places where food can be purchased do not. 1. They can often offer food at a significantly lower cost. This is especially true for urban BFBCs because they are formed to create a place to buy food at a significant discount from supermarkets or health food stores prices.⁵⁰ 2. They offer higher quality products, whether they be healthier, organic, more sustainable, or more local. 3. BFBCs often are able to build community for those involved.

2.6.1 Price:

The price difference between BFBCs and retail food stores is substantial. Members of a BFBC in Sacramento in the 1970s paid on average 25% less on their food than they would have paid at their local supermarket.⁵¹ BFBCs are able to do this by cutting costs in

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Abbot, “Buying in Bulk Whether It’s Because of Convenience, Chemicals or Conscience, People Are Forming Clubs to Buy Their Groceries Wholesale,” *Providence Journal - Bulletin*, November 13, 1997, <http://0-search.proquest.com.oasys.lib.oxy.edu/socialsciences/docview/397227928/139A49F55AD4F8B72B3/40?acountid=12935>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

⁵⁰ Pam Droog, “LADIES’ NIGHT OUT AT FOOD-BUYING CLUB: FIVE STAR LIFT Edition,” *St. Louis Post - Dispatch*, December 31, 1996, sec. Everyday Magazine, <http://0-search.proquest.com.oasys.lib.oxy.edu/socialsciences/docview/404341169/139A49F55AD4F8B72B3/25?acountid=12935>.

⁵¹ Ronald Cotterill et al., *Consumer Food Cooperatives* (Danville, Ill.: Order from Interstate Printers, 1982), 14.

two major areas that retail businesses cannot. 1. BFBCs rely mostly on volunteer labor.⁵² Labor is generally the largest cost in the budget of any business,⁵³ eliminating it lowers the price of goods. 2. BFBCs do attempt to make a profit.⁵⁴ Without the need to mark up costs beyond the original wholesale price, items can be sold to members for a price that is below market value.⁵⁵ Both of these differences cut down on a large portion of the overhead costs that businesses must take into consideration when pricing their goods.

2.6.2 Quality:

Generally food available through BFBCs is organically grown, local, or in some other way considered “natural.”⁵⁶ In this way, “cooperative buying arrangements... can improve access to nutritious food, reduce costs, and promote health.”⁵⁷ One BFBC that was able to improve the health of its members was in Emmet County, Michigan.⁵⁸ This was done partially because the BFBC made higher quality food available to rural members and but also because each bag was split up based on important food groups, ensuring that members were thinking about how much food from each group they chose to order.

2.6.3 Community Building:

BFBCs are places where people can socialize and get to know one another.⁵⁹ Not only do they create an environment that fosters community, but also the very way in which BFBCs function requires a strong community. According to members of BFBCs, all people

⁵² Robert Sommers et al., “Customer Characteristics and Attitudes at Participatory and Supermarket Cooperatives,” *The Journal of Consumer Affairs (pre-1986)* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 13.

⁵³ Cotterill, “Declining Competition in Food Retailing,” 15.

⁵⁴ Cotterill, “Declining Competition in Food Retailing,” 7.

⁵⁵ Irwin, “Belonging to a Food Buying Club,” 3.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Abbot, “Buying in Bulk Whether It’s Because of Convenience, Chemicals or Conscience, People Are Forming Clubs to Buy Their Groceries Wholesale: [ALL Edition],” 1.

⁵⁷ Ashman et al., *Seeds of Change: Strategies For Food Security For The Inner City*, 233.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Chase Scott, *Case study, Emmet County food cooperatives*, series on food cooperatives, Agricultural economics staff paper ([East Lansing]: Michigan State University, Dept. of Agricultural Economics, 1981).

⁵⁹ Droog, “LADIES’ NIGHT OUT AT FOOD-BUYING CLUB,” 1.

should take some responsibility in the BFBC so as to feel as though they have a role and are true members of the BFBC.⁶⁰ This means that in order to receive the monetary benefits associated with BFBCs, people will end up putting themselves in the position to receive the community-building benefits as well. The Emmet County BFBC is an example of the positive impacts that BFBCs can have on the community around them because it aided in the “revitalization of community spirit.”⁶¹ Retail food stores are not designed to foster community. Though lower prices and higher quality products are often the reasons that people form BFBCs, it is the enhanced sense of community that truly sets them apart from retail stores.

2.7 Historical Negatives of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

While the positive impacts usually outweigh downsides, BFBCs can also negatively affect communities. For example, some BFBCs end up being more expensive than conventional grocery stores because the organic and sustainable products they sell are expensive to begin with. Their products may be cheaper than health food stores such as Whole Foods, but they are still more expensive than those found in typical supermarkets.⁶² Therefore, they cannot be sold, even at wholesale prices, for less than foods that are not organic or unsustainable.⁶³ In these instances it is obvious that the members of the BFBC feel that quality is more important than price.⁶⁴ This can, however, cause conflicts among members. In BFBCs with members from different socio-economic statuses it is possible that

⁶⁰ Irwin, “Belonging to a Food Buying Club,” 1.

⁶¹ Scott, *Case study, Emmet County food cooperatives*, 8.

⁶² Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

⁶³ Abbot, “Buying in Bulk Whether It’s Because of Convenience, Chemicals or Conscience, People Are Forming Clubs to Buy Their Groceries Wholesale,” 2.

⁶⁴ Virginia Lee Warren, “The Secret of Success for Food-Buying Cooperatives,” *New York Times* (New York, NY, June 9, 1976), 1.

“the low-income people might want to get less quality and higher savings.”⁶⁵ Thus a split can occur between members with different expectations for the BFBC. Like other direct food sales operations, BFBCs can become “premium markets” for the wealthier demographics.⁶⁶ This negates the positive aspects of BFBCs that can be available to people of all incomes. However, this problem can be avoided in BFBCs through community involvement in the decision-making process regarding what products will be purchased.

BFBCs are also sometimes less accessible or completely inaccessible to low-income people because those people simply do not have the extra time or effort to put in the required volunteer hours. All adults in a family are often working, which means that they do not have much free time⁶⁷ and therefore cannot for the BFBC.⁶⁸ They believe their time is better spent at a paying job rather than volunteering to cut down on food costs. Since BFBCs are able to lower their costs almost exclusively by having members pay with time (rather than money), it is difficult to make allowances for those who do not have extra time. This was the problem that came up often with those I interviewed. Potential solutions to these problems will be discussed later on in this paper.

Chapter 3: Methodology

My methods include interviews and surveys that I used to compile a comprehensive list of BFBCs in Portland in order to comparatively analyze them. I interviewed people involved in BFBCs (often in leadership roles), as well as those involved in community food security and emergency food system approaches. I also surveyed members of BFBCs in

⁶⁵Dodge, *A New Look at Cooperatives*, 9.

⁶⁶ Guptill and Wilkins, “Buying into the Food System,” 40.

⁶⁷ Murray, “FOOD FIGHT / Co-ops from Decades Past Meet Harsh Competition of the '90s,” 1.

⁶⁸ Sommers et al., “Customer Characteristics and Attitudes at Participatory and Supermarket Cooperatives,” 13.

Portland and Seattle. I chose these cities because both have thriving BFBC communities. My interviews were conducted mostly in Los Angeles and Portland. I chose Los Angeles because there are vast areas affected by food insecurity in the city despite its strong alternative food movement. Portland is an especially interesting city to contrast with Los Angeles, not only because it has a large numbers of BFBCs but also because it has other alternative food sources that are recognized by the city council. While Seattle also has a thriving alternative food movement, there is less city involvement in the BFBC community. Since Portland has a much larger community of BFBCs, most of the discussion is focused on that city as the primary case study, with the discussion of Los Angeles and Seattle as background information.

In each city I used snowball sampling to contact most of my interviewees. In Portland, Robert Gottlieb put me in contact with Andy Fisher, who was then able to put me in contact with the leaders and members of BFBCs. These include: Chris Musser, Kathleen Mitchell, Chana Andler, Michelle Lasley, Susan Mund, and Annie Hundley (who now lives in Los Angeles). In my efforts to interview Portland BFBC leaders I was put in contact with some Seattle BFBC members. These included Annette Cottrell and Joshua McNichols. In Portland I also spoke with Caroline Kelly (Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon), and Steve Cohen (Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability Food Policy Council) about their respective organization's efforts to expand food access in the city. In Los Angeles, Robert Gottlieb put me in contact with Michael Flood (LA Regional Food Bank) and Frank Tamborello (Hunger Action LA). My interview questions consisted of open-ended questions about their experience with BFBCs and their thoughts on how BFBCs could be implemented in low-income urban areas: What makes BFBCs successful or not successful? How much do they know about them? Were they ever involved in any BFBCs? Do they think BFBCs could

be useful at stemming food insecurity issues and why? How do they think BFBCs could be implemented and organized? What demographics do they think are currently involved in BFBCs? I also asked other questions pertaining to each individual's area of expertise.

The leaders of BFBCs in Portland and Seattle who I interviewed distributed my survey to the members of various clubs. I asked questions about the individual respondent's demographics (age, race, household income, etc), their reasons for joining (how they heard about it, how much time they put in, the main reason they like it, etc.), their thoughts on effectiveness (or problems) in their BFBC, and their thoughts on whether (and how) BFBCs could be used to combat food insecurity issues. The questions were a mixture of open- and close-ended questions.

Using the information collected from my interviews and surveys I created a comprehensive list of BFBCs in the greater Portland area. This list was used to do an in-depth comparative case study of a few BFBCs in the Portland area. I focused on comparing demographics of current participants, common problems for BFBCs of all income levels, and best practices for BFBCs.

Chapter 4: Research

4.1 Portland and Seattle Food Buying Club Survey Results:

I surveyed twenty-four BFBC members in the Portland and Seattle areas.⁶⁹ Each participant was asked how long they had been a member of their BFBC as well as questions about his or her personal demographics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, marital status, annual income, and home ownership) in order to gather information on the average demographics of BFBCs in the two cities. Below are the personal responses in regards to demographics of

⁶⁹ Bulk Buying Club Survey. March 6, 2013. See Appendix A.

each respondent.

Length of BFBC membership:

Answer		Response	%
Less than 1 year		4	17%
1-2 years		3	13%
2-5 years		12	52%
More than 5 years		4	17%

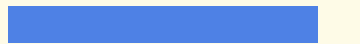





Gender:

Answer		Response	%
Male		2	8%
Female		22	92%
Total		24	100%



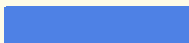


Age:

Answer		Response	%
18-25		0	0%
26-34		9	38%
35-54		12	50%
55-64		3	13%
65 or over		0	0%

Race/ethnicity:

Answer		Response	%
White/Caucasian		22	92%
African American		0	0%
Hispanic		0	0%
Asian		1	4%
Pacific Islander		1	4%
Mixed Race		1	4%

Marital Status:

Answer		Response	%
Single, never married		3	13%
Married without children		6	25%
Married with children		13	54%
Widowed		1	4%
Living w/ partner		1	4%

Annual Income:

Answer		Response	%
Below \$20,000		5	22%
\$20,000 - \$29,999		2	9%
\$30,000 - \$39,999		2	9%
\$40,000 - \$49,999		4	17%
\$50,000 - \$59,999		1	4%
\$60,000 - \$69,999		2	9%
\$70,000 - \$79,999		1	4%
\$80,000 - \$89,999		2	9%
\$90,000 or more		4	17%

Home Ownership:

Answer		Response	%
Rent		7	30%
Own		16	70%

To summarize, a majority of respondents were white, home-owning, married women between the ages of 35 and 54 with an annual income of over \$50,000 who had been members of their BFBC for two to five years. In addition to these questions I also asked participants open-ended questions about how they would describe the overall demographics of their own BFBC and how they thought their BFBC compared to others.

Responses were varied for both questions, but certain trends appeared. Of the twenty responses regarding the demographics of each participant's own BFBC, 65% stated that their BFBC consisted of a large majority of women. A few commented that while women dominated, many of them ordered for an entire family. Sixty percent also said that their BFBC was made up of mainly middle-aged (between 30 and 50), white, middle- and lower-middle class individuals. Only 20% of respondents said that a majority of their BFBC was made up of families and 5% said that most members were English-speaking and computer literate.

When asked whether they thought other BFBCs were similar to theirs, 40% said that they thought there were similarities and 15% were unsure. Of those who thought their BFBC was indicative of others, 10% specifically mentioned that they thought most BFBCs were primarily white, 5% thought women were a majority in all BFBCs, and 5% thought most BFBCs were as affluent as theirs. Another 5% thought that other BFBCs were either more inclusive and/or had lower-income members than their own BFBC.

The responses to the open ended questions support the idea that BFBCs, at least in Portland, are often inaccessible or not utilized by low-income individuals and people of color. This connects to the earlier discussion about the alternative food movement and how it often appears to be a more exclusive set of programs for middle-class families. While this may be the case for many Portland BFBCs, it is important to increase access to those groups already without food access in order to increase food security for all.

In my survey I also asked respondents questions about why they joined their BFBC, what they thought was most effective about it, what they thought major problems were, and what changes they thought could improve it. Although responses were varied, many participants shared similar sentiments. Most survey respondents were in agreement about

why they joined their respective BFBC, and usually had more than one reason that attracted them to their club. Lower prices was the most common reason, with 54% of respondents referencing it, while access to “good” (healthy, local, and organic) food was the second most common reason, with 50% of respondents mentioning it. Twenty-five percent of survey participants commented that supporting local farmers was important, and 21% said that they enjoyed the community building that BFBCs provided. Convenience was mentioned as a reason for joining in two ways: one, that the club was closer than the store (13%) and two, that it meant the respondent had to take fewer trips to the store (4%). Eight percent of respondents also said that they joined their club with the ultimate goal of turning it into a storefront food co-op. It is interesting to note that the most important reasons people joined BFBCs can be divided into two categories: one, to increase access to cheaper, higher quality food and two, to create and support a culture and community of good food both within their own group and on a greater scale with local farmers.

When asked what was most effective about their BFBC, respondents were divided. Thirty-one percent agreed that the ability to purchase good food at relatively low prices was what their club did best. Seventeen percent thought that the best part of their club was either the way the leadership communicated with members and worked together or the way the club as a whole communicated with partner farmers and suppliers. Only 13% of respondents thought that the strongest aspects of their BFBC were the success with which the club was run on volunteer labor. Another 13% thought the close-knit community that was fostered through the club was the best part. There was significantly less agreement on exactly what each club did best than on why respondents joined. However, the most common answer in regard to efficiency mirrored the two most common reasons for joining: access to cheaper food and access to “good” food.

The main problems identified within BFBCs were fairly diverse. According to 25% of the respondents, the biggest problem was not having enough consistent volunteers for the club to function smoothly. One respondent mentioned that his or her BFBC over-emphasized the money-saving side of the club and therefore attracted members who were not fully committed to the volunteer aspect of the group. Having too many members to create a cohesive community and successfully organize the BFBC was stated as a problem by 13% of survey participants. Issues of bad communication and fighting among members were mentioned by 13%. Inaccessibility to low-income households, late payment, and lack of food pick-up were noted as common problems by 8% of respondents, while 4% noted their BFBCs' overly unofficial organizational structure or issues with local farmers. These issues and the order in which they rank are reflective of problems discussed earlier in this paper. They will be further addressed in a later section.

Many of the survey respondents' proposed changes were equally as varied as the problems because they were in reaction to issues that survey participants had already identified. Twenty-five percent thought that programs should be enacted to make their BFBC more accessible to potential new members, especially those who are low-income. One respondent specifically said that clubs should obtain Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) machines so as to be able to accept SNAP benefits. Twenty-one percent said that there needed to be more volunteers and more distribution of jobs so that the work did not fall on the shoulders of a few members. The need for more volunteers was pointed out as both a problem and something to change by about the same number of respondents. However, significantly more survey participants thought outreach to low-income households was necessary than thought inaccessibility was a problem. This is surprising because one would expect identified problems to match up more closely with suggested solutions across the

board, rather than just in some cases. Only one (4%) or two (8%) respondents mentioned any of the other suggested changes. Some thought, that more variety in vendors and payment options should be developed. Various respondents also wanted a more organized club that paid at least one full-time staff person, a free central storage location, or a mobile BFBC in a truck. Many of these suggested changes are reflected in the analysis and recommendations sections of this paper.

4.2 Case Studies of Portland Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

Portland has a large number of BFBCs that serve various communities' needs. When interviewed, BFBC members had many opinions as to what exactly made Portland so optimal for BFBCs. Multiple interviewees mentioned the "foodie" culture fostered within the city.⁷⁰ This includes Portland's large number of farmers' markets per capita that paves the way for BFBCs and later becomes a forum in which club leaders can create contacts with farmers. Farmers' markets makes it possible for many more residents to access BFBCs that are conveniently close to their homes.⁷¹ As a part of this alternative food culture, Portland also has many local food suppliers and farmers who are willing and eager to work with BFBCs.⁷² Furthermore, this culture is strong enough that it is visible in the city zoning code. The code protects clubs from being classified as "retail enterprises" and therefore banned from residential areas.⁷³ Finally, some interviewees thought that Portland has a relatively high number of BFBCs because of the city's homogenous demographics (i.e.

⁷⁰ Chana Andler, Montavilla Buying Club, January 8, 2013; Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

⁷¹ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁷² Ibid.; Mitchell, Lents Buying Club; Rory Bowman, West Vancouver Buying Club, April 7, 2013.

⁷³ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

“white”).⁷⁴ One interviewee, thought that, while Portland generally has a lower per capita income than other “big cities,” the whiteness of the city means that BFBCs often do not have to deal with cultural or language barriers between members or different clubs that other low-income BFBCs often need to address.⁷⁵ The “foodie” culture may be stronger in Portland because the homogeneity that is present magnifies it. As a white fairly affluent city, Portland has a low percentage of residents who are excluded from the seemingly elite alternative food culture.

This strong food culture may also be due in part to the large amount of small farms within close proximity to Portland. One interviewee specifically noted Portland’s urban growth boundary because it keeps the city from overtaking the surrounding rural areas.⁷⁶ Another interviewee reiterated this point when he said that not only is the fertile Willamette Valley close to the city but also eastern Oregon, with its drier climate, provides a different and wide variety of crops in reasonably close proximity, while the coast offers its own options of seafood.⁷⁷ With so many options for purchasing food locally Portland’s BFBCs have many more options than other BFBCs from which to purchase food and are therefore more plentiful than in other cities.

I identified at least fourteen different clubs in the greater Portland area.⁷⁸ This list of BFBCs was compiled through the use of a survey distributed by the leaders of various BFBCs that I interviewed. Therefore, it is entirely possible that there are more clubs than

⁷⁴ Bowman, West Vancouver Buying Club.

⁷⁵ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁷⁶ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

⁷⁷ Steve Cohen, Portland-Multnomah Food Policy Council, April 5, 2013.

⁷⁸ These include the following BFBCs: Portland Eastside Buying Club, Montavilla Food Buying Club, Local Food Addiction Buying Club, Lents Grocery Buying Club, North Portland Buying Club, West Vancouver Buying Club, I Dig Worms Buying Club, Farm to Family, Columbia City Natural, Know Thy Food, Rose City Buying Club, Shared Salt, West Price Buying Club, and Northeast Portland Buying Club.

this list that were not mentioned by survey respondents. The four that I chose to use as case studies show a sample of the average BFBC in the area.

- Montavilla Food Buying Club

This BFBC has existed for the past five years and has approximately 90 members. The average member is a forty-something married woman. About 60% of members are homeowners, while the other 40% rent their houses. The majority of members are in lower- or upper-middle class households with two working adults.⁷⁹

- Lents Grocery Buying Club

This BFBC has existed since 2008 and currently has 280 members on its mailing list and 45 official voting members. The number of participating members is somewhere in between these two numbers. Members are mainly mid-thirties to mid-forties white married women with children. The majority of households are lower-middle class, with about 60% of who own their own home. Approximately 70% of active members are employed, while the other 30% are stay-at-home parents. This does not include the spouses of active members.⁸⁰

- West Vancouver Buying Club

This BFBC was created with the intent of allowing a maximum of ten households to participate; currently there are six. It has existed since 2009 when it was created as an offshoot of a BFBC with 50 member households that had begun in 2007. The split occurred because the original club morphed into a storefront food co-op that served more affluent suburban households. Currently this club is less

⁷⁹ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁸⁰ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

active than it was before the split. Member demographics are mostly forty- or fifty-something white couples or single people. Most members are working-class and live in single-family homes. They use the BFBC to enhance other sources of good food, such as gardens and farmers' markets.⁸¹

- Farm Fresh Buying Club (Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon)

The BFBC run by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon has existed for approximately six years. Currently there are fifty-one members of the club, 60% of whom are women and 40% of whom are men. The majority of members are white. However, they range from married couples with children, to twenty-something single individuals, to 70-something elderly people. The club was approved to accept SNAP benefits in 2010. The organization is currently doing outreach to low-income households in order to increase the number and food access of those potential new members.

4.4 Portland Urban Food Zoning Code:

The ability for BFBCs to exist is stronger in Portland because there is especially strong support for alternative food distribution venues at a city level. The "City of Portland/Count of Multnomah Food Policy Council... is making food system planning a part of the government's routine work."⁸² This can be seen in recent changes to Portland's Urban Food Zoning Code. These changes address market gardens, community gardens, food membership distribution sites, and farmers' markets.⁸³ The "food membership distribution sites" aspect of the code especially is important because it addresses both CSAs and BFBCs. Distribution sites are now allowed in all zones but have specific restrictions in

⁸¹ Bowman, West Vancouver Buying Club.

⁸² Winne, *Community Food Security: Promoting Food Security and Building Healthy Systems*, 7.

⁸³ Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, *Urban Food Zoning Code Update* (Portland, OR, June 13, 2012).

regards to “frequency [of deliveries] number of members, hours of operation, traffic, etc.”⁸⁴

These changes are important because they give BFBCs legal standing. Previously when there were complaints from neighbors there was no specific law stating whether or not BFBCs were legal.⁸⁵ This is partly because it was unclear if they were considered to be a business, and therefore not permitted in residential areas.⁸⁶ The local government has put in place zoning that endorses the existence of BFBCs as a legitimate way of accessing food as a result. If future plans include working with the government to allow BFBCs to accept SNAP, this may be especially important moving forward as BFBCs continue to grow and expand.

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

5.1 Self-Empowerment and Convenience of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

When interviewed, those who actively participate in BFBCs reported many positive aspects about their club. These can be broken up into two main concepts, the idea of convenience and the idea of self-empowerment. One woman said that she first created her buying club partly because it was an easier way to shop with a young child. She not only lived five miles from the nearest organic grocery store, but she also appreciated that using a BFBC meant that she did not need to drag her child out of the house and to the grocery store. Instead, food was delivered right to her door where she could sort through it in her house.⁸⁷ This is something that is especially relevant for low-income families with children. When parents work multiple jobs and take care of young children, it is important to cut out

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

⁸⁶ Cohen, Portland-Multnomah Food Policy Council.

⁸⁷ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

the transportation time involved in food purchasing. This may give these parents extra time to spend cooking more nutritious foods or working with their children on schoolwork.

One BFBC participant said the self-empowerment aspect of clubs allows residents within a community to be in control of creating a system that fits its own needs.⁸⁸ Another interviewee agreed, saying the food system should be broken down to the community level if it is going to function in the most useful way possible for consumers.⁸⁹ Self-empowerment and localized systems are especially important because low-income communities are often not included in the solutions that organizations based outside a community decide should be implemented. As mentioned before, SHARE was one example of a BFBC that was created for a Midwestern resident and did not attempt to incorporate local culture or needs into its operation. BFBCs allow participants to decide exactly what foods they want to have available, how they want to structure the payment system, and shape their own buying experience. Because BFBCs are able to provide foods that cannot be grown in certain areas, they may be able to make different ethnic foods available in areas where they are not normally found.⁹⁰ This gives members even more opportunities to decide exactly what they want to make available to themselves, thus enhancing their own buying power.

5.2 Monetary Gains of Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

Many of the other positive aspects that interviewees referenced were related to money. According to a member of a BFBC in the Seattle area, “Members of the buying club

⁸⁸ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

⁸⁹ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

benefited from the buys financially.”⁹¹ A Portlander involved in BFBCs stated that through pooling together in economies of scale, BFBCs lower food costs.⁹² A different Portland BFBC member commented that allowing participants to pay post-delivery, while picking up their food, was something she appreciated about her club.⁹³ Both of these are important, especially for lower-income households, because they often do not have extra money in advance to invest in large quantities of bulk food. Another BFBC member said that BFBC money is also an issue for members but that it is often secondary to their desire for pesticide-free, sustainable, organic food.⁹⁴ It is interesting to note that despite the fact that money is less important for those who are more well-off, the cost savings from BFBCs are still positive for all members.

BFBCs are also able to help local farmers monetarily because they know in advance that they will sell everything that they deliver. This is different than farmers’ markets where farmers are often left at the end of the day with unsold products.⁹⁵ Because farmers are often lower-income themselves, it is relevant that BFBCs may be able to aid them economically as well as aiding the club members.

5.3 Lack of Convenience and Ease:

Bulk Food Buying Clubs are not without their faults. When interviewing people connected to BFBCs, they brought up concerns ranging from those that affect all BFBCs to those that would be more pertinent to low-income ones. The first problems that all BFBCs have to grapple with are those of convenience. One woman who started her own BFBC

⁹¹ Annette Cottrell, East of Seattle Buying Club, January 3, 2013.

⁹² Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁹³ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

⁹⁴ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

mentioned that she sometimes missed the ability to go to a grocery store whenever she wanted to buy whatever she wanted.⁹⁶ Another participant said that she did not know how to best utilize her BFBC when she first joined; it took about a year for her to figure out how to obtain the best results. She also had a hard time participating after having her first child because volunteering was required of all members but children were not allowed to come along to the splits and deliveries.⁹⁷ These issues seemed to affect BFBC across the board regardless of member demographics. The creation of a new member integration program that utilizes educational pamphlets, or a mentorship program that matches experienced members with new ones, could easily solve these problems. The convenience issue can be overcome through BFBCs that provide enough benefits, monetary and otherwise, to make it worthwhile to utilize the clubs despite their inconveniences.

5.4 Overworked Volunteers and Lack of Volunteers:

Another issue that can be problematic for both affluent and lower-income BFBCs is that they often end up relying on a few volunteers to carry out the majority of the work. One woman commented that many members of her BFBC did not commit enough time to fully contribute to the community of the club.⁹⁸ Specifically speaking to the nature of more affluent BFBCs, another woman said that the members of her BFBC “seemed appreciative that they were able to afford organic (or beyond) produce from local farmers but not many of the people who participated were truly unable to afford this food some other way. Because of that, the buys were nice but not nice enough that they were willing to step up

⁹⁶ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

⁹⁷ Annie Hundley, North Portland Buying Club, February 4, 2013.

⁹⁸ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

and assume a more active role in them.”⁹⁹ Without a strong need for the benefits that the BFBC provided, many were unwilling to do all that was necessary to ensure it continued. This problem became clear not only through the comments of BFBC members but also in many articles detailing how to start a BFBC.¹⁰⁰

A lack of volunteers was also an issue for lower-income BFBCs, even though their members really need the benefits. This is because low-income households often do not have copious amounts of spare time. The benefits that BFBC members receive through lower food costs are not as free as many assume. In most BFBCs, unpaid volunteers who put in large quantities of time and energy do all the work. Rather than get paid, these volunteers save money on food costs. However, this is the most beneficial for middle-income families, who often have members with enough free time to volunteer. Lower-income households, where family members may be working more than one job, cannot always afford to spend time on unpaid endeavors even if they are money-saving ones.¹⁰¹ As one interviewee said, “for someone near poverty, time is a precious thing indeed. And lack of time... is one reason some people buy fast food”¹⁰² The fact that time is often worth more to low-income households is one main issue that needs to be considered when attempting to make BFBCs viable in low-income areas.

One potential solution to this problem is for an outside organization to take on the most time-consuming managerial jobs associated with a BFBC. The club run by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon is one example. The BFBC is only a small aspect of the organization’s food justice approach designed to make good food more accessible. Ecumenical Ministries

⁹⁹ Cottrell, East of Seattle Buying Club.

¹⁰⁰ Yes We Can!, “How to Create a Neighborhood Food-Buying Club - W.K. Kellogg Foundation.”

¹⁰¹ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹⁰² Joshua McNichols, Seattle area, December 28, 2012.

is conscious about incorporating the thoughts and needs of residents in the research they do. They are currently working on a food assessment in Rockwood, a predominantly low-income neighborhood. They have included local residents in the design process of the survey and have had focus groups in three different languages (English, Spanish, and Russian) in order to compile information that is truly relevant to those living in the area, and therefore impacted by problems there.¹⁰³ The fact that Ecumenical Ministries considers the active integration of resident opinions in their projects is important because it means that the BFBC can still function for the community in similar ways to traditional ones.

The BFBC itself is run in a similar fashion to other clubs. Unlike other clubs, the managerial work falls on an Ecumenical Ministries staff person. This person receives a list of available produce from farmers each Thursday, creates an order form (that members complete by Sunday), compiles the order and distributes it to the suppliers on Monday, and receives the order on Wednesday. The BFBC still relies on member volunteer work to help divide up the food each week among various households, but all of the most time-consuming organizational work to obtain the food is done by a single staff person.

5.5 Inability to Accept SNAP Benefits:

Another roadblock for low-income-oriented BFBCs is that they cannot currently accept SNAP benefits. The grants that can be used to purchase EBT machines are only available for authorized food retailers.¹⁰⁴ Since BFBCs function based on volunteer efforts in residential areas, they do not have business addresses and therefore do not qualify for

¹⁰³ Caroline Kelly, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, April 3, 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Anna Curtin, Portland Farmers' Market, January 9, 2013.

entitlement programs.¹⁰⁵ Some BFBCs are also unable to accept SNAP money because they function on a pre-pay system. This is problematic because the SNAP program requires that food must be received within two weeks of payment.¹⁰⁶ This is not always possible with a pre-pay system.

However, there are ways to overcome this problem. The BFBC run through Ecumenical Ministries is again an example of a club that has overcome these issues. Since Ecumenical Ministries is a nonprofit organization it was able to purchase an EBT machine and currently accept SNAP benefits. This does not mean, however, that the BFBC consists of exclusively low-income members. In fact, one of the most important aspects that those working to expand the club are doing is low-income outreach, because many SNAP users are unaware of the option to purchase through the club. Further recommendations for ways to increase access of SNAP recipients to BFBCs will be discussed later in this paper.

5.6 Specific Problems Related to Low-Income-Oriented BFBCs:

The problems that most people interviewed thought would specifically affect low-income BFBCs were mostly logistical: language barriers, difficulty with online ordering, and a lack of space. One woman stated that there could be language barriers between members and those the BFBC buys from.¹⁰⁷ Another commented that “There are over 60 languages spoken in [the area], Somalis, Burmese, Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Russian and many of the folks are mono-linguistic [sic].”¹⁰⁸ The organization required to bridge one language gap, never mind up to 60, would add large time requirements to the responsibilities that

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹⁰⁶ Curtin, Portland Farmers’ Market.

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Mund, Rockwood, January 15, 2013.

are already falling onto a few overworked volunteers. An even greater potential barrier was potential members' lack computer skills and access to the Internet. One woman stated, "Most of the companies selling food for the buying club have online purchasing systems for each group and are solely in English."¹⁰⁹ In addition, lower-income areas generally contain homes with limited storage space.¹¹⁰ An interviewee commented that storage was often difficult to find for households buying large quantities in bulk, especially for meats, cheeses, and other goods.¹¹¹ If a community organization or paid position were to be involved in the BFBC process it would be possible to overcome the language barrier and computer access problems. Extra storage space at a community center or other space could also be arranged through the partnership with another organization. These possibilities will be discussed in further detail in the recommendation portion of this paper.

5.7 Necessities for Bulk Food Buying Clubs:

Throughout the interview process it became clear that there are certain things that all BFBCs need in order to operate. These range from basic physical storage needs, to how volunteering is structured, to ways to incorporate new members. It was interesting to see how much agreement there was between all those interviewed about what the most important aspects of BFBCs are. While some placed more emphasis on one necessity over another, they all seemed to agree on the highest priority: the need for a good system of volunteering that does not cause a few to burn out because they have been willing to do time-intensive jobs.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

While the bare essentials needed for a BFBC include refrigerators and some storage space (staff is not technically required),¹¹² there was a range of ways that interviewees thought BFBC could be better organized in order to sustain their everyday logistical aspects. One woman mentioned that her BFBC had been most successful when they have been able to spread out the work among as many people as possible.¹¹³ This way, if a volunteering member is unable to continue participating in the BFBC, the entire operation would not fall apart with his or her departure. One Portland BFBC splits up responsibilities in the following way; “Buys [are] organized regularly, with teams of people who order, split, and deliver the products. Product is taken away to ‘villages,’ which are subsets of the club at large, and then dispersed to member households.”¹¹⁴ In this system there is no single person that the BFBC relies on in order for certain buys to occur. Another woman noted that an accountant who can volunteer two hours per day to the BFBC was especially important. She thought that other duties could be divided among members who were less dedicated but that the accountant position needed to be someone trustworthy and reliable.¹¹⁵

The general consensus of two other interviewees was that the major coordinator positions needed to be paid in order to make it possible for people to commit the required amount of time.¹¹⁶ One woman in a leadership role in her BFBC stated, “Coordinating the buys has been a huge labor of love that some of the buyers appreciated but I feel like many of them have come to expect it. I have had but a few of them try and help coordinate the buys. I plan to continue doing food buys for a much smaller group of consumers going

¹¹² Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Michelle Lasley, North Portland Buying Club, February 1, 2013.

¹¹⁵ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹¹⁶ Cottrell, East of Seattle Buying Club; Hundley, North Portland Buying Club.

forward.”¹¹⁷ Another agreed that people often burn out because the informal way BFBC are organized does not sufficiently divide the work up. She said that some models required members to pay a small percentage extra on their orders in order to cover a paid position.¹¹⁸ A more formal organizational model,¹¹⁹ including paid positions, was what most interviewees thought would work best.

Other interviewees also thought that the more formal organizational model should include ways to better incorporate new members into the BFBC. One woman said that new members need direction and personal help in order to fully participate because the systems used for orders are inefficient. She also thought that those without computer skills, access to the Internet, or access to a car would need aid to fully utilize a BFBC.¹²⁰ The problem of training new members to properly use the ordering system (including training them to use a computer if necessary) could be done through orientation-type programs designed by each BFBC to fit its specific model. Some members could then be assigned the task of helping new members instead of volunteering at splits. Programs could also be created to foster car-pooling or delivery services for those members who cannot drive to splits. Some members could also volunteer their computers at specific times for those who do not have their own. While the orientation programs could feasibly be done in an informal volunteer manner, the issues of lack of access to cars and computers would be better addressed if the BFBC assigned a paid position to coordinate the programs designed to increase access. Ways in which paid positions can be created to increase the efficiency of BFBC is discussed further in the recommendations section.

¹¹⁷ Cottrell, East of Seattle Buying Club.

¹¹⁸ Hundley, North Portland Buying Club.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

5.8 Suggestions on How to Create Low-Income BFBCs:

Interviewees gave several different responses when asked what they thought were the most feasible ways to create BFBCs in low-income areas and address the extra challenges that these areas have that more affluent areas do not have. One woman thought that perhaps less complex versions of BFBCs could be created so as to more easily and quickly bring food into these areas. She thought that if a BFBC were to identify what food staples a specific area or community thought were most important, prepackaged boxes could be created.¹²¹ This could eliminate the problems of computer access discussed earlier because members would no longer need to specify exactly what they wanted for each order; instead, a simpler non-internet based order form could be created. However, this model could also create problems if community members had differing opinions about what they deem to be the most important staples. This also would give the low-income BFBCs significantly less options than the average BFBC. This is problematic as it lessens the self-help aspect of BFBCs (discussed earlier in this paper) by taking away the decision-making power of each member for their own needs and wants.

Many interviewees discussed the possibility of BFBCs partnering with other organizations in an effort to relieve some of the organizing requirements from members who may not have enough time. One woman thought that either an existing local governmental or nongovernmental organization could carry out the managerial and logistical overhead required for operating orders, deliveries, and splits. She also suggested having one person or organization that could commit to coordinating multiple BFBCs in close proximity to one another. That way each BFBC could be run more smoothly by one

¹²¹ Hundley, North Portland Buying Club.

person who was committed and paid to do so.¹²² One man said, “mash together buying clubs... with progressive, community organizations that are willing to help disseminate knowledge to people without the time to do research, you'd have the silver bullet you seek.”¹²³

Others suggested working with organizations for purposes of space rather than coordination. One interviewee thought that a food bank, church, or other organization would work well because these places generally have enough space to store food and allow BFBC members to split it up. She also thought that some people would be more comfortable going to one of these public locations to pick up their food as opposed to someone's house.¹²⁴ Another woman agreed that these places would be ideal for splitting food up and aiding with the organizational work, but worried that people might not have enough time to get to these public spaces, which may not be in a residential area.¹²⁵ One interviewee thought that places such as churches, which often have kitchens, could be especially useful for dividing up food. She further suggested that the BFBCs could have cooking lessons for their members, especially if an unusual food was available for purchase.¹²⁶

Finding ways to incorporate and utilize SNAP benefits was the last suggestion that many interviewees offered. One woman stated, “Without SNAP access, we know both as SNAP clients and lower income members, a food buy club will not happen. People do not have the income to buy their food.”¹²⁷ It is therefore crucial to find ways to allow the use of SNAP benefits if a BFBC is going to be successful in a low-income area. One interviewee thought that perhaps local governments could work to apply SNAP benefits to BFBCs.

¹²² Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

¹²³ McNichols, Seattle area.

¹²⁴ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

¹²⁵ Mitchell, Lents Buying Club.

¹²⁶ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

¹²⁷ Mund, Rockwood.

However, she was unsure if this would be possible because BFBCs are sometimes in a gray area in terms of health codes.¹²⁸ One man suggested creating a voucher program for people to use at BFBCs.¹²⁹ This could be done by partnering with farmers' markets or other venues that already have EBT machines. Another interviewee proposed that members could pay through a food bank with their SNAP benefits. She thought the food bank could then transfer that money to the BFBC or directly to the farmers. This, however, would perhaps require that certain BFBCs be registered with the food bank in order to facilitate transactions. She also suggested that a governmental organization might be able to fill this position.¹³⁰ This allows for anonymous transactions, keeping other members from knowing who is or is not using SNAP to purchase food. All interviewees had many creative suggestions for ways to create more functional low-income BFBCs. However, not all of them may be currently feasible. The most pertinent ones are discussed further in the recommendations section of this paper.

5.9 Summary of Findings and Analysis:

As is described above, there are many different aspects that are positive and problematic for both middle-income and low-income Bulk Food Buying Clubs. BFBCs work not only to enhance self-empowerment and convenience for members but also to produce significant monetary gains in the form of cheaper and healthy food. This is not always the case. Since BFBCs are unconventional venues for purchasing food, they are sometimes less convenient and more difficult for members to use than grocery stores. Furthermore, BFBCs

¹²⁸ Musser, Eastside Buying Club.

¹²⁹ Tamborello, Hunger Action LA.

¹³⁰ Andler, Montavilla Buying Club.

often rely too heavily on a few overworked volunteers, making the group vulnerable to collapse if those individuals decide to leave.

It is imperative that BFBCs have enough positive attributes to overcome the various inconveniences and complexities associated with them in order to be attractive to current and new members. This could include the development of training programs designed to quickly incorporate new members into the BFBC. It could also mean creating simpler versions of BFBCs, such as prepackaged boxes. However, the failings of SHARE stand as a warning to those who try to sell a prepackaged box without consulting community members.

Low-income BFBCs have even more potential problems than middle-income ones, including barriers connected to language, computer access, and a lack of storage space. Furthermore, low-income BFBCs often will not have any interested members unless they can have lower volunteer time requirements and accept SNAP benefits. Overworked volunteers are particularly problematic for low-income BFBCs. While it is inconvenient for middle-income BFBC members to end up in this position, it is often impossible for low-income people to meet volunteer requirements. Possible solutions include programs that better spread out work, payment systems to make it possible for individuals to continue shouldering large volunteer positions, and systems that partner with local community organizations or other groups to alleviate organizational and leadership duties. Partnering with outside groups could also help to overcome the above-mentioned logistical barriers that are often specific only to low-income BFBCs. The last problem specific to low-income BFBCs is the inability to accept SNAP. There are many possible solutions to this problem, but one important aspect is government acceptance of BFBCs as legitimate sources of food. This has already begun in Portland due to the zoning changes that now legally recognize

BFBCs. With all of these potential solutions to increase the positive attributes of BFBCs and overcome many of the negative attributes, BFBCs in general, and low-income BFBCs specifically, could become a viable strategy to bring healthy, organic, local, and sustainable food to current members and expand to be accessible to those currently without food security.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

My recommendations closely mirror the suggestions given by those interviewed. It is essential to create some way to accept SNAP benefits. The next most important proposal is to find a way to compensate those currently volunteering for time-consuming organizational positions. Last, I suggest that BFBCs work with community organizations in order to relieve some of the managerial duties from BFBC members without taking away their decision-making power.

6.1 Accepting SNAP Benefits:

It is highly unlikely that a low-income BFBC would be sustainable without the ability to use SNAP benefits. Because these benefits can be used only for food, those receiving them often must allocate their other money to living expenses such as housing. Therefore, most of the money that can be used for food is that which is available through SNAP, even if the food is cheaper than it would be otherwise. Because of this, CSAs and farmers' markets have looked to "entitlement programs as appropriate sources of subsidy"¹³¹ because "the biggest success in bringing in low-income people [to markets] has been through the use of

¹³¹ Guthman, Morris, and Allen, "Squaring Farm Security and Food Security in Two Types of Alternative Food Institutions."

entitlements.”¹³² BFBCs must do the same in order to increase their accessibility to low-income household relying on SNAP benefits for food purchases.

As stated on the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) website, the eligibility requirements to become a store that can accept SNAP benefits do not stipulate the way in which food is sold. Rather, the website gives two options to meet the requirements for what is offered through the store. Either the retailer must “Offer for sale, on a continuous basis, at least three varieties of qualifying foods in each of the following four staple food groups, with perishable foods in at least two of the categories: meat, poultry or fish, bread or cereal, vegetables or fruits, and dairy products” or “More than one-half (50%) of the total dollar amount of all retail sales (food, nonfood, gas and services) sold in the store must be from the sale of eligible staple foods.”¹³³ While BFBCs might not meet the first set of requirements, they would certainly meet the second: many sell exclusively food that would be considered “staple foods.” However, it is unclear whether a BFBC would be able to register for a SNAP permit. The FNS website specifically mentions stores and farmers’ markets as acceptable and restaurants as unacceptable but says nothing about other types of food venue.

If BFBCs are allowed to become SNAP-approved, then they should follow the farmers’ market model, rather than a store model, for accepting SNAP with an EBT machine. This is done with “central point-of-sale (POS)” systems that issue “farmers’ market scrip or tokens”¹³⁴ to customers, which can then be used with market vendors in place of cash. This “allows all eligible food vendors in a multi-vendor farmers’ market to

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ United States Department of Agriculture, “Retail Store Eligibility USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program,” *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*, n.d., <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/store-eligibility.htm>.

¹³⁴ Guthman, Morris, and Allen, “Squaring Farm Security and Food Security in Two Types of Alternative Food Institutions.”

sell eligible food products to EBT recipients without each vendor needing individual authorization”¹³⁵ from FNS. At the end of each market day vendors then “trade the scrip for cash, checks or receipts for future payment from market operators.”¹³⁶ The scrip or token piece of this system would not work with BFBCs because members do not make their purchases as individuals through each specific wholesaler or farmer from which the BFBC orders. However, a central POS system could allow for the use of SNAP benefits if the BFBC had a bank account for the organization from which all partner wholesalers and farmers were paid. The money could be easily tracked from SNAP recipient to BFBC to food provider. This system is also optimal because it allows the BFBC full control of its operations.

Another option for using a POS type method would be for a BFBC to coordinate with an organization that already has an EBT machine. This would avoid the potential above-mentioned problems connected to BFBCs not being allowed to obtain a SNAP permit. However, this system would require the partner organization to conduct bookkeeping for the BFBC and act as the middleman. This involves a complex web of transfers between the BFBC member, partner organization, government, BFBC, and food supplier. With so many different parties involved it is possible for some money to be misplaced or for the time between payment and delivery to be longer than the FNS-permitted two weeks. However, this method is much cheaper for the BFBC because it does not require them to actually purchase their own EBT machine or go through the process of becoming SNAP Authorized Retailers. Since BFBCs are not making a profit, they do not have reserve money with which to purchase such equipment. Also, this option is feasible even if FNS does not currently

¹³⁵ Ecology Center, “A Simple Guide for Market Managers: EBT Access at Farmers’ Markets” (Ecology Center, n.d.).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

allow BFBCs to obtain SNAP permits. For these reasons, if BFBCs cannot currently be registered to accept EBT, partnering with an organization that is SNAP registered would be a good option for the near future. It is ultimately important to change the system so that BFBCs can apply for their own SNAP permits, even if this means creating a registration system with the government for programs such as BFBCs or CSAs that do not function in a traditional retail format.

6.2 Compensating Main Volunteer Organizers:

Monetary compensation for the main organizational volunteers of BFBCs is important because it gives an incentive for people to take on these difficult and time-consuming roles. By paying the people who are truly responsible for the functioning of the BFBC, they not only feel as though their efforts are appreciated but are also able to give up more time to the BFBC. This applies to both lower- and upper-income BFBCs. However, it is especially important for volunteers for low-income BFBCs to be paid because time is often much more valuable to them than their more affluent counterparts. Unfortunately, there are issues connected to paying volunteers because many BFBCs currently function on a model that only collects money from members to cover food costs. This could be best overcome in two ways: each member household could pay a small monthly or annual fee to cover the organizational costs of the operation, or the BFBC could apply for a grant with which to pay a small managerial staff. An additional fee might not be feasible for a low-income BFBC where members do not have extra money to contribute. Also, this fee would not be able to be paid with SNAP benefits, as it is not a cost directly going to a food purchase. Applying for grants, on the other hand, might require that the BFBC register either as a non-profit organization or in some other way in order to be eligible. While this

could potentially change the unofficial manner in which BFBCs function, I believe that this option is more feasible for those who are already struggling to afford food than an added fee.

6.3 Partnering with Community Organizations:

While “grassroots groups, by themselves, lack the time and resources to challenge the daunting inequities of the national food system,”¹³⁷ they can be a part of aiding one strategy to bring healthier food into low-income areas where it does not currently exist. Partnering with community organizations is a way for BFBCs to be relieved of some of the organizational requirements while still preserving the self-help aspect. Since most community organizations function on the principle that it is imperative to incorporate community members in all programs, BFBC members will not lose their decision-making power if they allow a community organization to take over some of the managerial aspects. As is visible in the earlier discussion of the Ecumenical Ministries’ BFBC, it is possible to run a successful club through an organization without disconnecting the community. In order to do this I recommend that the Ecumenical Ministries operation be seen as a potential model. The community organization staff member works with BFBC members to create a list of what foods the community would like to be able to purchase. He or she should then work with wholesalers and farmers to organize orders that make the requested foods available. BFBC members should still be required to aid in the splits in order to keep them involved and active. This plan is also another way of changing the most time-consuming volunteer jobs into paid positions. However, this method is potentially

¹³⁷ Christopher D. Cook and John Rodgers, “Community Food Security: Growing Back to the Earth,” *Earth Island Journal* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1997).

better than the aforementioned ones because it relies on individuals who are already in an organization that has the necessary resources to manage a buying club and pay those doing most of the work.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

BFBCs can be implemented in low-income urban areas, but there are also many associated complications. This is partly because low-income BFBCs have their own problems to overcome in addition to the various issues that all BFBCs must grapple with regardless of the socioeconomic statuses of members. All BFBCs must realize that the food they offer is only cheaper than other (pricier) healthy food, struggle with complexities and inconveniences that are inherent to their informal organization, and find a way to avoid the problem of relying on a few overworked volunteers. For low-income BFBC some of these problems (such as a lack of volunteers) make it impossible to even start a club. The list of other problems that low-income BFBCs must address include an inability to accept SNAP, language barriers, inadequate computer access, lack of storage space, and many other issues. Because of the disproportionate burdens on working-class households, it is important to specifically advocate and work towards increasing low-income BFBCs rather than exclusively pushing for more BFBCs in general.

While I believe that BFBCs are an important option for bringing affordable food into low-income areas, I do not believe that they can single-handedly bring enough food to make the necessary difference. They must be one of many programs enacted or expanded from their current forms that are designed to fight food insecurity in areas where good (fresh, organic, sustainable, and local) food is currently unavailable. Existing programs include farmers' markets with SNAP benefits matching programs, gleaning groups that

donate leftover farmers' market or farm produce to food banks, CSA boxes that are cheaper and/or subsidized for low-income households, and mobile vending produce trucks or carts, among others. Alone, these programs "are in no way a solution to the problem of food insecurity faced by low-income people."¹³⁸ However, together they can begin to increase the amount of healthy, organic, sustainable, and local food that is available in low-income areas that are plagued by an overabundance of unhealthy food options and a lack of good food.



¹³⁸ Guthman, Morris, and Allen, "Squaring Farm Security and Food Security in Two Types of Alternative Food Institutions," 664.

Appendix A: Bulk Buying Club Survey Final Report


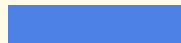

Final report

Last Modified: 04/01/2013

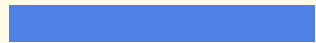



1. What is your gender?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Male		2	8%
2	Female		22	92%
	Total		24	100%

2. How old are you?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	18-25		0	0%
2	26-34		9	38%
3	35-54		12	50%
4	55-64		3	13%
5	65 or over		0	0%
	Total		24	100%

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	White/Caucasian		22	92%
2	African American		0	0%
3	Hispanic		0	0%
4	Asian		1	4%
5	Native American		0	0%
6	Pacific Islander		1	4%
7	Other		1	4%

4. If other, please list:

Text Response

Mixed race

5. What is your current status?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Single, never married		3	13%
2	Married without children		6	25%
3	Married with children		13	54%
4	Divorced		0	0%
5	Seperated		0	0%
6	Widowed		1	4%
7	Living w/ partner		1	4%
	Total		24	100%

6. What is your annual income range?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Below \$20,000		5	22%
2	\$20,000 - \$29,999		2	9%
3	\$30,000 - \$39,999		2	9%
4	\$40,000 - \$49,999		4	17%
5	\$50,000 - \$59,999		1	4%
6	\$60,000 - \$69,999		2	9%
7	\$80,000 - \$89,999		2	9%
8	\$90,000 or more		4	17%
9	\$70,000 - \$79,999		1	4%
	Total		23	100%

7. Do you rent or own your home?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Rent		7	30%
2	Own		16	70%
	Total		23	100%

8. How did you hear about your bulk buying club? (Check all that apply)

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Friends or family		9	39%
2	On-line (email, social media, etc.)		9	39%
3	Work or school		1	4%
4	Other organization in which you participate		7	30%
5	Other		6	26%

9. Why did you decide to join your current club?

Text Response

Wanted to get the best deals possible on pesticide free food

I wasn't able to afford organic produce at the grocery store on a regular basis

Had been operating club on behalf of emerging food co-op but they killed it for territorial reasons.

Good prices for food and fewer trips to the grocery store.

To save money on food.

The closest grocery store to my home is 20 blocks away and for various reasons it provides a lousy shopping experience. Organic produce options are low, there is no locally and humanely farmed meat, and the store itself is in sad shape. The store where I prefer to shop for produce and meat is eight miles away, and it is not a viable place for me to shop for packaged goods like coffee, or non-food like detergent, because their prices are higher. The food buying club gave me an option to buy real food affordably without a long drive or a depressing shopping experience. Also, a percentage of my purchases through the buying club are saved towards a possible neighborhood food co-op storefront.. a dream I hope for and believe in!

Wanted cheaper and healthy choices than grocery store (we don't have a new seasons or co-op very close to us)

We wanted to work on creating a storefront food co-op in our neighborhood, and started a buying club in order to work towards that goal.

See above

So I could have access to more local, organic food as well as supporting small farmers and other food producers in my community.

To try and save money through bulk buying and to participate in a community activity that relates to my work.

I wanted access to good food at good prices.

To get healthy sustainable food at at price that I can actually afford.

Better quality, local, organic and lower prices of food and animals and to build a community of like minded people

Access to good quality food at affordable prices; opportunity to support local farmers; join community that cares about food and sustainability

I was looking for a place to buy mainly organic food. I wanted to also have a connection to buy sustainably and from local farmers. I also like to bulk buy some items. We live about 35 miles outside of the metropolitan area with only Fred Meyers (Kroger) and Safeway as options.

To participate in group buys directly from organic farmers.

Source quality organic foods for less money

Make friends, know community, access to higher quality foods at a lower cost, reduced packaging, local buys

To get high quality food that's hard or impossible to get in regular stores/CSAs. To get better prices. To strengthen local social networks and support systems. To support small and artisan producers.

10. How long have you been a member of your club?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	less than 1 year		4	17%
2	1-2 years		3	13%
3	2-5 years		12	52%
4	more than 5 years		4	17%
	Total		23	100%

11. How would you describe your activities in the club?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Frequent		14	64%
2	Occasional		6	27%
3	Rare		2	9%
	Total		22	100%

12. How much time do you (or other members of your household) put in for your club weekly?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	less than 5 hours		8	35%
2	5-10 hours		0	0%
3	10-15 hours		2	9%
4	more than 15 hours		4	17%
5	none		9	39%
	Total		23	100%

13. How much time do you (or other members of your household) put in for your club monthly?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	less than 5 hours		7	30%
2	5-30 hours		5	22%
3	30-60 hours		0	0%
4	more than 60 hours		6	26%
5	none		5	22%
	Total		23	100%

14. How much money do you spend monthly on food purchased through your club?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	less than \$20		2	9%
2	\$20-\$30		3	14%
3	\$30-\$40		0	0%
4	\$40-\$50		1	5%
5	\$50-\$100		6	27%
6	more than \$100		10	45%
	Total		22	100%

15. Do you save money by purchasing food through your club?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		20	91%
2	No		2	9%
	Total		22	100%

16. If yes, how much money do you save monthly?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	less than \$10		5	26%
2	\$10-\$25		2	11%
3	\$25-\$40		0	0%
4	more than \$40		12	63%
	Total		19	100%

17. How would you describe the demographics of your club? (Average age, gender, ethnicity, class, etc)

Text Response

Most people will not have this info

Mostly people in their 30's & 40's, stable families, usually with kids, usually some kind of reason they want to find food that's organic or wheat-free, a large percentage (for Portland) of Christians, lower-middle class, mostly white (in Lents, this is surprising - I don't think there's a single person of Hispanic or Asian descent), fairly gadget-and-computer savvy. (This is Kathleen Mitchell doing this survey - I don't think I'm adding anything I didn't tell you before, but I don't want you to count what I have to say twice :-))

Working-class white, mostly women.

It varies. But, mostly young, middle class, mothers of young kids that earn less than 40,000 per year.

From what I can tell, it's mostly made up of people like me -- white women between the ages of 30-50, mid- to low-income; unlike me, many are working parents.

White, moms, women volunteers, 30-somethings

age: 25-55 ish (average in 30s & 40s) gender: about 95% female, but mostly with the female head of household as the person ordering/participating online, while the purchases are for a whole household. Pickups are more even, maybe 55/45 female/male. ethnicity: mostly white. Probably more than 90%. Also everyone in the club is a fluent english speaker, while the neighborhood we are in includes people who speak up to 20 other languages. class: mix of lower middle to upper middle. Very few participants from working class, because buying clubs cannot take food stamps without a storefront, and there is a time/technology investment required to participate.

Families of all sizes, single people, low/high socio economic, male and female

Mostly online, the people I have met are white middle class

White, generation x, lower socio-economic status

I'm not totally sure, but I think it's mainly white middle class, singles or young families.

Average age between 30 and 40, married families, with 1+ children. We are mostly white.

Almost entirely white and middle class. I think mostly middle aged folks. More women than men. No noticeable trans presence. There are probably LGB folks.

Married, 30-50 yo, female buying for her family with children, upper-middle class, Christian or other strong religious affiliation

They all seem to be 40+, but I have not had the opportunity to meet them in person. I cannot guess about the other demographics, except most seem to be working from their posts on availability for pick-up.

We are a wide ranging group from singles, couples, families (1-9 kids), seniors, young, and everything in between. We have mainly women doing the orders but more men are getting actively involved. Ethnicity is mainly white with other ethnic groups involved but live in a county that is mainly white. Very strange for me as I came from a county in Calif. that was

very racially diverse. We are a wide ranging socio- economic group which is reflected in our county. We are also very diverse religiously or lack thereof with many families home schooling and the rest glad for public school. We are united by our desire for good, healthy food at a reasonable price while farmers receive a fair wage and purchase fair trade goods from out of country. We look for low prices but not at the expense of us not having farmers still in business as a result of not being profitable.

Middle aged people, usually families, most involvement by mother of family, lower-middle class

Members of Farm to Family are over 90% women Most are 30-40yr old and have children under 10. Most are in middle to upper middle class.

Women, families

Many of us have never met except on-line, but most members are probably middle class white females in the 40-60 year age range.

18. Do you imagine most other clubs to be similar to yours? Why or why not? In what ways?

Text Response

Need to change the language here. It still says co-op

The people I have met or talked to or seen pictures of from other clubs (NoPo, East Portland, Montavilla) are also white. LFAB is almost completely overlapped (membership-wise) with LG, so obviously they're very similar. In fact, so similar as to be called "same." :-)

In the Portland area they are, because that is where the self-identified need is.

Yes and no. I can go into great detail on this if you like. Each club is run differently. Some are a coop organization, and some are run as a personal business. Some are casual and sporadic. Some are organized, and some are haphazard. They are all very different on structure and participation. Check into the Oklahoma Food Coop.

I expect ours is a lot like most. Women end up in the role of buying the family's groceries, so our membership probably resembles most others'. We have accounts with local providers and distributors and I expect that most buying clubs work with similar relationships. One way that ours might be different is that we are reserving some income (5% of members' orders) towards establishing a co-op. We also work alongside a neighborhood farmers' market in the summer and fall, and adjust our produce orders accordingly (often there is no need to place a produce order during the growing season, when our own gardens and our farmers' market meets out needs)!

Don't know

Most of the other clubs in Portland are similar in demographics, but somewhat less organized/formal. (Some are more organized, though.)

Yes, have participated in many others.

Not sure

I don't really know, I think in Portland there are a lot of gen x folks who participate, but some are in much more affluent areas.

I think so, but I've seen some trying to be more innovative, such as trying to be inclusive (the We Are Oregon Neighborhoods United club?).

No. Other clubs have much lower incomes than our clubs. Other clubs have much wider diversities than us.

I do not know but I suspect that other clubs are similar. I think clubs like this require both an investment in time and money. One has to be willing and able to pick things up with a car, to work out payment systems and do a whole bunch of on line coordination which is very important if you experience exhaustion because of being working poor and/or being a single parent etc. One also has to be able to pay large amounts of money up front for large amounts of goods even if they are cheaper per unit. Not everyone can throw down 300 dollars for a side of beef not to mention buy a chest freezer to store it. I suspect this is why there are not very many poor folk in the buyers club. It is also a white dominated group that focuses it's operations in white dominated neighborhoods (Ballard is %86 white)

which will inevitably make it psychologically costly and logistically more difficult for people of color to become members.

Most of the groups that I'm a part of are similar except for the raw pet food group

We had a recent discussion of buying club by-laws. So it sound like other clubs sometimes charge members a nominal fee that goes to the coordinator of each buy, while ours does not. I imagine demographics of club members would be different for different clubs.

We feel we are different. We order produce weekly. We have 40-80 items available along with spices, teas, meat, butter and other stuff weekly. We are not geographically in a neighborhood but are far ranging. We also order everything else on a monthly basis. We order everything from meat, Frontier, Dave's Killer Bread (USDA ORGANICO, Larsen's Creamery (Local organic butter), Bob's Red Mill plus other opportunities that come available. We operate as a 501 3c and also work with the Public Health Foundation, OHSU Extension and the different school districts nutrition dept.s. in offering and assisting with cooking classes and how to shop and afford healthy food choices. Can you tell I love our group. We have 30-70 who order every week depending on everyones life.





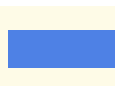


yes

Similar but each is different. One local club focuses mostly on bulk buys from non-local distributors. I focus on connecting with local producers of organic/natural food but also purchase collective orders from non-local distributors.

Yes, families looking to save money

Ours is run as an informal co-op, and has been rather loosely organized and flexible.

19. How effective do you think your club is?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Very Ineffective		1	5%
2	Ineffective		1	5%
3	Somewhat Ineffective		0	0%
4	Neither Effective nor Ineffective		1	5%
5	Somewhat Effective		7	32%
6	Effective		7	32%
7	Very Effective		5	23%
	Total		22	100%

20. Please explain why you think your club is effective or ineffective:

Text Response

I get good deals on many things I want to buy, the steering committee works well together, it is able to run on volunteer labor.

It works for me but it doesn't work for a lot of other people. It's hard to get the word out beyond the circle we're already a part of. Sometimes people join and need a lot of hand-holding - they generally just get left by the wayside.

People get the limited stuff they need in an efficient way.

People volunteer a lot of time to organize the purchases with spreadsheets, notify people of what's available, and sort things when food arrives.

Mine was the catalyst for starting many other ones. Mine also made enough money to sponsor a little league team a couple of years ago. I was also able to get all of my food for free as the sole proprietor for a while. Now most of my activity has shifted to getting the Lents Grocery coop up and running. It was through my initial foundation that they were able to start up. :-)

We have very good communication. We have both a Facebook group and an e-mail list, and both are very well maintained by club co-ordinators. It is very unusual that a question goes unanswered for longer than a day, so I think our "customer satisfaction" rate must be very high. Some of our food providers (owners of local farms) are members of the Facebook group and mailing list, so they can answer specific questions about their products. The only difficulty I encounter with purchasing through the buying club is payment. We prefer to avoid fees assessed by online payment services, but writing checks comes with delays -- sometimes it's hard to keep track of the budget!

People get food

We have been very effective at getting healthy & local food at good prices to our members. We have been less effective at finding enough volunteers to be sustainable, finding enough volunteers to help open a storefront, increasing healthy food access to people who are in poverty or do not speak fluent english (or really, increasing food access to most of the people who live in our neighborhood rather than other neighborhoods.)

We have great communication with various social networks, and emails.

Lots of emails scares people off.

The local produce and foodstuffs is generally less expensive than the grocery store, but sundries are similar or more expensive. I love the ability to see where my food is coming from.

I think it could reach more low-income and diverse families in the neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods.

Because we are organized and run like a business.

It is effective in what it does which is to save money for middle class folks. It is not effective at addressing hunger or poverty because of what I mention above.

My goals and the participants are met. We are willing to ask the hard questions and research our options

Established relationship with farmers; good dialogue and participation on the forum among members; frequent buys; different members coordinating buys and folks willing to help new coordinators out.

I feel that we are effective in providing an affordable option for families that is also convenient.



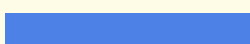


The point of our club generally is to purchase food as wholesome as we can, as close to the source as possible. We do a great job of coordinating buys from farmers, and I hope that continues, as it was due to very few people.

We have grown considerably by word of mouth only. We are effective in establishing good working relationships with local farmers, ranchers and businesses. We succeed in helping our members save money while accessing healthy local food

Tight knit community, accessible

Group members have been able to buy a variety of excellent quality products at very good prices.

21. What is your favorite part about the club? (Check all that apply)

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Prices		16	73%
2	Community aspects		15	68%
3	Food variety/options		16	73%
4	Accessibility		9	41%
5	Other		4	18%

22. If other, please list:

Text Response

Working directly with the farmers

For me it is all of those things. But, the community has been my absolute favorite part. I have made so many lifelong friends through my efforts.

Able to have Raw milk in this area

The sharing members have during pick-up and the creation of new friendships. I love how we learn from each other.

Supporting farmers directly.

23. Are there aspects you wish you could change about your club?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		17	85%
2	No		3	15%
	Total		20	100%

24. If yes, what would you change?

Text Response

Even more variety in buys

I would either hire someone full time to do the accounting, promoting, splitting up of stuff, and creation of ordering systems (i.e. make it into a business), or I would work to distribute that load more. Too much falls on Laura's shoulders. I would also make it more accessible to people who don't understand how to use Google Docs. I would put it in a truck and take it on the road.

More vendors, but those require more volunteers, such as for annual buys.

I think the only thing I would change is payment option -- for the reason mentioned above - - otherwise I am happy with the way the club works. And I hope to have that storefront someday!

Not so much changes that I am actually in charge of, but I would like to change the process for accessing an EBT machine so that we could take food stamps without a storefront, which would radically increase our ability to get healthy food to people who live in our neighborhood. I would also like to have more volunteers, and require our members to be at least mildly committed to opening a storefront co-op, or otherwise working on increasing food access for our neighborhood, rather than just being interested in getting cheaper food for themselves personally. (At the moment, we cannot limit the membership and still meet our minimum orders.)

Somehow make it easier

There isn't much sense of cohesion for me in my club. I've only met a few other people in the club and it seems that only 2-3 people take an active role.

Somehow more streamlined, easier to understand how to order, easier for new folks to know how to order.

Find us a central location to store foods that doesn't cost anything.

I wish it was easier for poor folks to take part. I wish it was a movement that was centered around those who are targeted by oppression.

Some people are negative and complain when things aren't perfect. Willingness to be open-minded and willing to volunteer are a must for groups to continue.

Accessibility (this is the closest buying club to my area - however sometimes I can pick up at a club buyers house who lives closer). Also, because the club is farther away, I often cannot participate in the social events.

We would like more members and I wish you didn't have to pull teeth sometimes for volunteers.

Some recent bickering. Occasional focus on buying highly processed "natural" products.

growing membership

Storefront

Make it more organized.

25. What are the main problems you have encountered with your club and how do you think these could be averted in other clubs?

Text Response

Late payment, no show for pick-up. See MFBC website for contracts and rules

The volume of work vs the number of volunteers. There aren't enough volunteers to spread the work around AND we haven't found a good way to spread the work around. This is what killed LFAB (well, it's not completely dead, but it's mostly dead). Joan (leader of LFAB) now only does two orders - Frontier & Azure - where she used to have 6 - 10 orders. Other people ran a large percentage of the other orders, but her house was the pickup spot for everything. She wanted her life back so she stopped most of the orders and restricted pickup hours severely. I'd like to say maybe there's a critical mass that we haven't reached yet, and if we had more members we'd have more people running buys, but KTF may prove that wrong... they had about 1000 members at one point, yet (as far as I know) it was still mainly one person managing everything. I think I need to do my OWN interview with KTF people if I ever get time!

Previous clubs were too big, which is why this club is intentionally small: no more than ten households. When clubs get too big the collegiality and participation drops, relying too much on a few key volunteers, who get burned out.

I have way too much to say here. There are many things that could and do go wrong. The absolute first thing I ever tell anyone who is starting a FBC is to know your goal ahead of time. And, have your rules and policies written. Do not make exceptions.

I like the organization of clubs that limit the number of members they have at the start, so everyone actually knows everyone else. We evolved from another buying club and inherited a large membership and email list that is a somewhat unwieldy amount of people, and includes a lot of people who are not necessarily interested in the stated goals of our club. I think it would be especially nice, in places like Portland that have lots of people interested in buying clubs, to have many more smaller clubs, which combine together for larger orders and then distribute things more locally. I think that a policy of emphasizing the need for members to volunteer when they join would also be helpful. And less emphasis on telling people how much money they will save by joining, as that tends to get members who do not volunteer.

I have trouble deciding where to get the best price on things. There are so many different group buys.

Getting people to meet periodically and getting enough volunteers to sort orders. Nobody seems to have extra time these days, least of all me.

It would be neat if someone had time to do more community outreach to low income and diverse families and figure out ways to make it more accessible (options for ordering on paper rather than google spreadsheets).

The thematic problems encountered are generally who to buy from and who's going to do the work. They can be averted in other clubs by organizing. People need buy in to belong to the club (that is they have to believe in it in some level) and be motivated to make it continue.

An intermedeary would be emensly helpfull. Something similare to the seattle farm coop where folks can go and buy reasonable quantities of goods but don't have to pay the overhead of a grocery store such as labor, advertising and CEOs. There is a coop like this in Eugene. It's kinda inbetween a buyers club and a food coop.

Only have people that you enjoy working with be a part of your personal club. So much energy goes into ordering and sorting. You'll need to feel like people are appreciate the time put into it. Make the details very clear and expect lots of questions.

It seems like people don't always pay for their orders promptly or pick-up promptly. Most orders have moved to being ordered only when all payments are in. This at first slowed orders down, however now there is a payment cut-off date, which I appreciate. I also think that if folks don't pick up in a certain amount of time, their payment goes to the club as a donation, and then the item can be posted for anyone in the group to then purchase and take off the hands of the buy coordinator.

Understanding when you purchase from small, local farmers they are not always the best business people and sometimes do not deliver as promised. It is hard because we want to support them in a big way but some folks have issues with these purchases and we encourage them not to participate in these buys.

Bickering/negativity. Our club is primarily online, and because of that, people don't always remember to be respectful, or there is miscommunication based on the tone of a message. The moderators help, but mostly remind people to calm down and be more respectful. Having periodic meetings might help avert this, because I believe it to be a problem with being mostly an online group.

Finding a way to organize: co-op? non-profit? for profit? LLC? community owned? I think as more clubs form, and try out different models, it will become more clear which model works best.

Overwhelming at first. Need to be simple, provide access to answer questions

Historially the group has always been very helpful and supportive of each other. But recently challenges have arisen over new members, expectations, and personality conflicts have arisen, which have caused a strong diviciveness in the previously highly supportive and cooperative group. This could probably be avoided by having strong and clear written rules and expectations. But most of the people drawn to this group dislike strong boundaries and rebel against them. Which is part of the challenge we're facing. Kind of a Catch 22.

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