



# Food Hubs Growing Strong: Using Ethnography to Facilitate Communication in Food Hub Development

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Food hubs offer an innovative solution for aggregating small- and mid-scale production and systematizing distribution, while maintaining the values of civic agriculture. Yet there is little systems research critically examining how well they achieve their ends and further the economic, social and environmental goals of sustainable agriculture. (LS 13-256) **“Food Hubs and the Regional Food System: Refining Our Understanding of Best Practices from Foodsheds to Operations”** investigates how different food hub models contribute to the expansion of sustainable food systems, rural development and farmers’ quality of life in Georgia. The project utilizes ethnography, which combines qualitative and quantitative research methods (semi-structured, open-ended interviews and immersive participant observation) and focuses on the lived experience of people on the ground, including attitudes, beliefs, practices and relationships. This approach allows us to move beyond simple dichotomies (yes/no) to elicit a more qualified (how, why, to what extent) understanding of food hub operations.

## Young Scholar Research

A key need identified by research participants for the success of local, sustainable food systems is the development of appropriate communication and marketing resources, which reflect more refined understandings of the perspectives and realities of food hub entrepreneurs. Through immersive participant observation during a 4-week internship at the Turnip Truck of Georgia, my project was to a) document challenges, needs, barriers and innovations of farmers and food hub entrepreneurs, b) assist in the production of first-person narratives that can be used by farmers and the hub for communication, outreach and marketing activities and c) develop a replicable system for narrative development.

## Research Partnership

The Turnip Truck of Georgia is a small food hub in Atlanta, GA, founded in 2008. It specializes in aggregating and distributing food from over 50 small, local producers to area restaurants and other institutional clients. The Turnip Truck is invested in developing local food systems and facilitated my fieldwork by allowing me to participate in daily hub operations, offering historical context on the development of local food systems in Georgia, and coordinating my contact with farmers.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN SUSTAINABLE FOOD AGGREGATION

Ethnographic research has several benefits for understanding social systems such as food production and consumption. This is because ethnography relies on long-term, immersive participant observation to collect information about the daily lives of individuals.



### Participant Observation and Farm Visits:

- Working at the Turnip Truck of Georgia for 4 weeks
- Receiving, organizing and inventorying of local products
- Deliveries to restaurants
- Farm visits (n=4) with Turnip Truck staff to develop visual and narrative material on the farm and its relationship to the hub
- Responsible for assisting professional videographer
- Taking additional photography and video at farms and the food hub

### Qualitative Data Collection:

- Literature review on sustainable food systems in Georgia
- 5 ethnographic Interviews with Turnip Truck staff
- 5 ethnographic Interviews with hub farmers
- Field notes, voice (n=2) and video (n=2) recordings of farm visits



## FINDINGS

My experience taught me a lot about how this particular food hub operates and what it means to the people who work with it. There are three major components that go into a successful food hub, and they all have to do with social relationships: Farmers’ relationship with the hub, the hub’s relationship with restaurants and other customers, and restaurants’ relationships with their clients. This chain is actually quite fragile. The social aspect of the business is something that shouldn’t be overlooked. Farmers and restaurants work with the Turnip Truck because they can trust it to do good by them.

- The hub provides an important financial buffer, often paying farmers COD, while carrying credit balances with its clients
- Stakeholders do not always have a clear understanding of each other and may not always communicate their needs and challenges successfully
- Better understanding of needs and challenges in all stages of the local food supply chain will facilitate its growth and sustainability, including production coordination and economies of scale for the farmers
- Ethnographic research, documentation and outreach materials development can assist in improving communication and supporting a more resilient sustainable food system



## EXPERIENCE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I am grateful for S-SARE’s support for making this project possible. The farmers’ market that I used to work at in Mexico was a whole lot different than this food hub here in Atlanta. This experience was a real eye opener in terms of sustainable agriculture and this type of research is something that I want to pursue and help develop in the future. I forged relationships with local farmers and the people at the Turnip Truck and acquired significant knowledge about produce, farming methods and the business of making a sustainable food system possible. This experience allowed me to practice my ethnographic skills in a new context and develop new ideas about my work. I have already outlined the next step for this research, which is to conduct participant observation with some of the farmers I got to know through this project. In the future, as I continue researching sustainable agriculture I will focus on farmer perspectives.