

Ethnography and Sustainable Agriculture Research: Investigating the Southwest



Georgia Project Food Hub

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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 that critically examines food hubs; how well do 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 (e.g. yes/no) to elicit a more qualified (e.g. how, why, to what extent) understanding of food hub operations.

Ethnographic Field School/Young Scholar Research

The Young Scholar research was conducted as part of a six-week ethnographic field school at Georgia State University. The field school combined in-class discussion on methods and theory in sustainable agriculture with hands-on experience working with an active food hub in Albany GA. During my three weeks in Albany my fellow classmates and I worked with Southwest Georgia Project (SWGAP) staff and farmers, in the process of beginning a new food hub. My goal as a Young Scholar researcher was to investigate this process, in order to better understand the challenges faced by small-scale African-American farmers in constructing a sustainable food system.

Research Partnership

SWGAP is a civil rights non-profit organization founded in 1961, dedicated to social justice and community development through grassroots organization, education, engagement and empowerment. SWGAP primarily works with historically underserved, limited-resource African-American farmers. SWGAP aggregation efforts, such as Farm to School, Farmers’ Markets and food hub development assist farmers in finding new markets, and address food desert issues in the region. SWGAP facilitated much of our fieldwork by inviting us to a workshop on sustainable farming practices and food aggregation, coordinating our work with farmers, and informing us about the historical and social background of Albany.



ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK IN SUSTAINABLE FARMING

Ethnographic research has several benefits for studying and 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.

On-Farm and Marketing Participant Observation:

- Working on a chemical-free family farm (~5 acres currently being farmed)
- Weeding with a hand-tiller or hoe
- Observing tractor tilling and planting (cantaloupe, watermelon, squash, zucchini)
- Harvesting vegetables: squash, zucchini, green beans, peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes
- Arranging drip irrigation hoses
- Participating in the Dougherty County Health Department Farmers Market
- Assisting with hog care

Qualitative Data Collection:

- Participating in SWGAP farm training and orientation
- Attending “Seeds of Prosperity” small farmer workshop
- 5 ethnographic Interviews with farmers and SWGAP staff



FINDINGS

Through these experiences I learned first hand that food hub work is not simply a matter of connecting small farmers to larger markets but in this context, it is about addressing issues of inequality and social justice and making rural communities stronger and more resilient.

- Markets operate differently and the specific goals of individual farmers affect their relationships with those markets.
- Other sources of income frequently supplement farm income, and may even cover losses to sustain the farm
- Currently, there are insufficient options for market access available for limited-resource African-American farmers. The SWGAP attempts to open many new avenues to address the needs of its different constituents
- Farmers have difficulties with funding, which can be largely attributed to the bureaucratic nature of government aid offices (USDA, NRCS)
- Farmers operate with many and diverse constraints: time, labor, equipment, and accurate information and awareness of adaptive farming techniques and funding opportunities



EXPERIENCE

I found this experience to be both educational and inspiring. Reading assignments during the first week of class gave me an understanding of theories regarding the importance of sustainable agriculture for rural communities and existing models of local food aggregation in the United States. Working on farms with people who dedicate their time and

money to produce for their local communities has illuminated the importance of food and agriculture in all aspects of life in the Southwest Georgia region. I have gained a great appreciation for the work of small-scale sustainable farmers, and have been inspired to become involved with farmer’s markets in Atlanta; I am currently signed up as a volunteer at the Piedmont Park Green Market to help vendors unload and load equipment. Whether it be through continued research in Anthropological studies, as a career, or for personal enjoyment, I see agriculture as playing an integral part of my life in the future.

