

ACI's Cultural Nutrition Program: Framing the Narrative on Culturally Appropriate Foods in the

Lunchroom

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**Abstract**

Since its inception in 2015, the Afrimerican Cultural Institute has dedicated itself to educating people - but specifically BIPOC Boston youth - in cultural competency and life skills through an empowering, pro-Black, cross-African-diasporic framework. Emanating from its founder Marlon Solomon's own trans-diasporic identity as a Nigerian and African-American man, the institute actively works to comprehensively digest why and how the American capitalist system treats people of the African diaspora the way it does. Understanding how these mistreatments manifest in modern society ultimately assists in identifying the most impactful points of leverage within the current system from which a restorative, pro-Black, community based, systemic overhaul can begin. Currently, most of this work is being implemented at Boston Preparatory Charter School in Hyde Park: a school with a majority Black and Brown student population. With support and relevant contextual information provided by multiple groups of students from Northeastern University, this paper serves to serialize the narrative of ACI's work and, more relevantly, it's current project: the Cultural Food Nutrition Program. Working with Boston Preparatory Charter School, ACI has developed a cultural food calendar, where meals of cultural significance will be served on their respective holidays and teachers will engage in fun activities about the festivity.

We will highlight what the institute has studied to determine that action should be taken, what strategic attempts at change have already been made, and where the organization's next steps will take the community. More specifically, we will contend with how deep, historical, systemic racism throughout Boston has contributed to the exploitation of African diasporic youth

within the context of the modern food system and the school cafeteria. We will briefly chronicle previous community efforts to intervene in this exploitation (i.e. collectively protesting the establishment of a Burger King across the street from the school) and present data as to why the Cultural Nutrition Program is pertinent, relevant, urgent, and unique from any similar predecessors. Lastly, we will emphasize some strategic plans of action facilitated by the institute that the community wishes to take in order to prevent further exploitation, namely, the creation of a Community Benefits Agreement.

*Keywords:* Cultural Nutrition Program, pro-Black, Community Benefits Agreement

## **History**

### **Redlining, Racism, and Access to Resources**

As research shows, “the practice of redlining had already locked many families of color into segregated neighborhoods, discouraging businesses from serving Black communities — and limiting Black families’ access to grocery stores, healthy foods, and nutritious school meals” (FoodCorps, 2021). Redlining has historically been a major discriminatory factor regarding food access and adequate school lunches. Redlining is defined as the systemic denial of various services or goods by federal government agencies, local governments, or the private sector either directly or through selective raising of prices (Solomon, 2021). Redlining is a national phenomenon intentionally designed to disadvantage and discriminate against minority and low-income households. This legalized segregation created a divide between communities: those who could leave poor-urban areas, and those who could not. This typically resulted in poor, underfunded areas majorly constituting people of color while suburbia held the mass exodus of

White families that fled during the White Flight of the 1950s and 1960s. As White communities left, they took their resources and higher incomes with them. This pushed quality infrastructure of all kinds out of cities, including healthily and adequately stocked grocery stores and cleaner food supply chains that catered local school cafeterias.

### **The Historic Impact of Systemic Racism in School Cafeterias**

The first impactful school lunch policy was the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act of 1946. He was a “staunch segregationist and well known for inhibiting the Civil Rights movement in the United States” (McKee-Brown, 2021), who “falsely proclaimed equal access” (McKee-Brown, 2021) to school lunches. “The Act leveraged structural racism to privilege white, middle class communities and neglected impoverished communities and communities of color” (McKee-Brown, 2021). This is a continuation of the structural racism -like redlining- that created essentially paralleling systems and policies in America: one for the advantaged and disadvantaged respectively. The suburbanization and White Flight from urban centers affected the development of the NSLP (National School Lunch Program) because the original white middle class mothers who were advocates of the NSLA (National School Lunch Act, the act that established the NSLP) back in 1946 weren’t there to speak up about NSLP in the 1950’s (Gaddis, 2019). When they fled urban centers, the NSLP food quality declined and was seen as “welfare” food. More affluent families could afford to pack their children’s lunch, and the notion of “competitive caring” accounts for the parents who didn’t care about other people’s kids, as long as their own children could have special advantages above others. In other words, this further contributed to structural racism and classism that was embedded within the NSLA of

1946 because it continued to leave Black people out of the center in developing and enacting community-driven solutions that would, ultimately, affect them the most. Students of color are not just disadvantaged in school lunches because of the Act, but because of the historical redlining and gentrification of communities. Those that live in these communities are inhibited in their access and choice of food outside of school as well. School lunches and the food accessible outside of schools within communities of color or low-income communities impacts students negatively.

In Boston, the redlined districts saturate students in those communities with fast food options over whole, healthy foods that many “green-lined” communities have. School districts in Massachusetts have been disproportionately affected, causing many problems for students and faculty. The effects of redlining are extensive and prominent today. In Boston, there is an increased amount of ‘non-quality’ stores, such as liquor stores and fast food restaurants, and a lack of health food shops, such as expensive, high-end grocery stores. In Hyde Park, the saturation of fast food restaurants in proximity to schools is higher than those of whiter communities. This includes but is not limited to a Burger King intentionally built directly across the street from a majority BIPOC school, as well as other fast food competitors like McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and White Castle. The closest Burger King is 1.3 mi from the school, the closest McDonald’s is 1.1 mi, and the closest Wendy’s is 2.3 mi. In total, the average distance of the school from a fast food restaurant is 1.56 mi.

School lunches within areas like Hyde Park also lack the nutritional and cultural values that are achieved in whiter schools. The lack of cultural relevance within school lunches is another effect of redlining.

Prior to the existence of school lunches, children's families were the ones who were held responsible for feeding their children. As school lunch became more widespread in the 20th century, it became a form of mutual aid and community care for students to have their nutritional needs taken care of by the school system, which was where they spend a large part of their day. However, in the 1920's when school cafeterias became more popular, so did the notion of there being "the right kind of food", also known as "American food", to assimilate the waves of immigrant children who "needed to be turned to proper Americans" (Park, 2014). As school lunch turned to being more of a commodity and an existing avenue for capitalism to take place in the 1930's, businesses and corporate brands turned a profit by sending poster advertisements to be hung up in schools persuading people to buy their products.

Although the government made somewhat of an attempt at tethering the farming industry to the school system by offering to pay farmers for the surplus of food they harvested so that food could be donated to schools through the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the government cared less about what foods the surplus was than helping out the farmers after the Great Depression. In the cafeteria, in order to appeal to children from all backgrounds, the food was purposefully cooked to be "low toned" (Park, 2014). Over the years, the quality of the food that was allowed to be served in schools simply declined from a lack of government oversight, with no regard for nutritional value. In 1979, the USDA claimed that the food only needed to have a "minimum nutritional value", which meant that schools began to rely more on private contractors and easy, cheap, fast-food like meals such as burgers and french fries began to be served. Once Reagan came into office in the 80's, school lunch programs began experiencing severe budget cuts.

**How These Injustices Present Themselves in the Modern Cafeteria**

It is said that school lunches were used to assimilate non-American children; a.k.a., people of color were no longer going to receive foods that were culturally appropriate for themselves. The white-washing of school lunches has impacted students of color, leaving them with lower self-esteem and lack of inner security. However, even as the evidence of redlining, gentrification, and structural racist systems are being brought to light, there is a lack of urgency to change the school lunch program and food injustices being faced within these communities. Today, school lunches are undesirable for a handful of reasons. Students avoid school lunches because of the connotation or assumption that those who get school lunches are poor. Others do not participate in school food programs because the food itself is undesirable.

The injustices of modern cafeterias remain similar to the problems of the past. based on a racist infrastructure, the system is granting students unequal access to nutritional, cultural foods. Susan Levine is the director of the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and has been studying the history of school lunches for some time. She has been offered many solutions on how to fix these school lunches, including the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. Levines responses to the act was that,

*"It's a good idea, there's nothing wrong with it. But again, to my mind, the opportunity to do what she's saying to have healthy school lunches is limited by the problems of the school systems and the budgets. The real takeaway from history is that a healthy school lunch depends a lot less on what individual choices kids make or the particular foods in front of them, and is really about the social and political decisions we make about how we want to feed our kids and how we want to pay for it" (Park, 2014 ).*

The nation's first public school lunch programs were birthed from progressive era activism that promoted charity organized services for the working class. This ceased after the Red Scare following World War One. Seeing how free school lunches and other distributed resources were in fact possible, the government feared that people would be keen to appealing to communism and that would put the capitalist system in danger (Gaddis, 2019). Another obstacle was that this movement was not intersectional at all. Middle-class white women were seen as the "saviors" to be leading it. This was shaped by the gendered power dynamics because it failed to consider the Black women who were also contributing but weren't given proper forefront because they were preoccupied by the sustenance system of sharecropping that was continuing in the south. This made it so that, from the beginning, the actual lunches being served were not culturally appropriate. Modern lunches remain unjust because of lack of budgeting, limits on choice, and a generally discriminatory system. Implementing healthy food choices and culturally inclusive meals would help develop better lunches today.

### **A Solution to these Issues: ACI's Cultural Nutrition Program**

#### **Who is ACI?**

The Afriamerican Culture Initiative (ACI) is a nonprofit organization based in Boston with an underlying goal to be the leading "African Diaspora Cultural Education" provider in the United States. First founded in December of 2015 by Marlon Solomon, a civil engineer/construction project manager, the ACI's mission is to "build cultural bridges in the African diaspora through education, technology and travel". The ACI has seven primary



curriculum areas available for individuals of all ages to further educate themselves on cultures across the African Diaspora. These include:

- African American specific Cultural Competency.
- African Diaspora Cultural Competency.
- STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts & Mathematics) Social Justice Project Management.
- Financial Literacy and Entrepreneurship.
- Cultural Nutritional Education.
- Civics (includes African Diaspora History).
- African Diaspora POP Culture & Affairs.

Along with the seven previously listed curriculum areas provided by the ACI, the institute offers services including online African cultural education school, corporately responsible cultural competency consulting, and corporately responsible cultural programming sponsorship.

### **A Brief Description of ACI's Previous Food Justice Work (Burger King)**

One of the ACI's major projects was the Hyde Park Burger King Project which investigated and outlined the harms of placing a Burger King directly across from a Boston Preparatory Charter School. Along with the Boston Charter School, organizations in the neighborhood are strongly against the operation carried out by Northeast Foods and Finard Properties as concerns rise about the health of the students in the nearby school. It is important to note that the majority of students at the Boston Preparatory Charter School are students of color.

The ACI worked on this project in partnership with Northeastern University, specifically the College of Engineering, where they conducted a study on the redline sprawl and focused on the connections between racism and food access, education, security and health. The project introduced African diaspora cultural competency to appeal to students by providing school meals. The goal is to acquire healthier, culturally appropriate meals that are easily accessible and readily available to students as part of an overall goal to educate individuals on multiculturalism. Through this project, communities are empowered to achieve a level of cultural nutrition for their students and, eventually, increase the appeal of cultural cuisine.

**What is the Cultural Nutrition Program**

The Cultural Nutrition Program arose from the study on redline sprawl in Boston as a result of the Burger King opening in Hyde Park right across the street from the Boston Preparatory Charter School. The program has five primary goals which include the following:

1. To determine healthy and culturally appropriate food recipes to make available to the students that reflect their cultural backgrounds.
2. To convert these recipes into FDA guidelines for daily food and nutrition requirements for mass production.
3. To develop programs & events with the school to encourage student engagement, cultural education and popularity of proposed food options.
4. Develop a community network and improve partnerships that aid with programming, authenticity and diversity.

5. Develop a system for data collection and determine data points for further development of menus, programs and duplication of BPCS programming.

The Cultural Nutrition Program project has a team which is composed of the Afrimerican Culture Initiative Inc., Always Cultural Food Traditions, Boston Preparatory Charter School, Independent Cultural Ambassadors, Freshpick Cafe, and Northeastern University Students.

### **Why It Is Important**

Encouraging schools to provide culturally competent meals and educating their students on their nutritional needs is critical. There is an important link between culture and health which emphasizes the need to better understand and apply cultural constructs as part of nutrition programs. This can actively help reduce the prevalence of lower health outcomes and shorter life expectancies caused by unhealthy food and chronic illness - such as diabetes, hypertension, and kidney malfunction. Recognizing the community needs and valuing local traditions is needed to better serve those students who attend the schools. Increasing authentic and culturally appropriate foods into the school menus is an opportunity to embrace and honor the diversity of the student body as a whole. Currently, most school meal menus reflect an “American” diet serving pizza, chicken nuggets, and other American cuisine which only reflects part of the American population. Foods that are available in schools reflect a message about what food is “regular” and, in turn, places an emphasis on cultures represented through the food that is being served and undervalues the foods that are not. Integrating foods and culturally appropriate menus provides a platform to empower students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. It allows

for celebration and normalization of students and their experiences coming from multicultural backgrounds while also encouraging appreciation of the students' own world and others.

### **How the Cultural Nutrition Program is different from its Predecessors**

The Cultural Nutrition Program takes a restorative approach whereby targeted redlined areas should receive specific status for rejuvenation investment. The approach is also pro-African and emphasises healthy eating in the appropriate ethnocultural manner. Additionally the ACI has introduced a set of Community Benefit Agreements (CBA) which is a step towards creating transparent community demands. Essentially, the CBA would force invasive corporations to fund programs such as the Cultural Nutrition Program should they want to operate in the area and inherently reverse the lowered quality of life caused by companies such as Burger King located in Hyde Park.

## **Methods**

### **Participants (Students, Teachers, and Lunch Staff)**

In order to holistically gauge opinions on the current school lunch system by the demographic that are affected the most by it, a group of Northeastern students surveyed the students of Boston Preparatory Charter School.

### **Assessments and Measures (Surveys taken by previous Northeastern group)**

The results of the student survey are as follows: in asking students what they like about the lunch the school serves, most of the answers align with each other. These are some examples of answers that were given, "Nothing. There are no different foods for people who are allergic to

certain things. it's either bring your own lunch or you get no lunch”, “I don't eat it”, “It feeds me”. Many of these answers pointed to the lack of options that some students have to settle with, or that some students avoid because their families are able to provide them with home lunch. The question asking what students disliked about the lunch, these were some of the answers: “It is not appetizing and sometimes it's not cooked properly”, “The no seasoning or salt”, “Or there aren't options for a student to choose from”, “It’s dry and most of the time have no flavor and I’m not sure whether they use pork which I don’t eat”, “sometimes it looks nasty”, “we only get milk as a drink”, “Its not made from the kitchen”, “they need to serve more spicy food”, “What I dislike about the food is that its basically reheated frozen foods and half of the time the food is either tasteless or doesn't look very edible.”, “What I dislike is the breakfast is sometimes too sweet for the morning”, “There is not much seasoning and the "cultural foods" they try to make usually end up made very wrong”. Survey results also highlighted that 56% of students said they prefer cultural foods over fast foods, and they had many suggestions as to which cultural foods they were referring to.

The qualitative data collected in the form of self-surveys that the children from Boston Preparatory Charter School runs parallel to the data collected overall from Boston Public Schools. According to BOSFoodLove, a program ran by the city of Boston aimed at increasing students’ access to nutritious food during and outside of school, 75% of BPS students live at or below poverty level. Although school lunches are offered for free, there is only 40% participation in school breakfast (BOSFoodLove, 2021). This gap in participation comes from students’ perception of the school food, and the lack of reliability in the food to meet the needs of the students (including dietary accommodations and cultural meals).

**Discussion (Further Implications for other Schools and Communities)**

As the data collected and provided will attest, the Cultural Nutrition Program is a beneficial, empowering tool for community autonomy. It can be utilized to foster deeper community development and engagement, and can serve as a basis for collective action against predatory corporations of all kinds. Collaboration around such a program is a seamless way to introduce long-term strategic planning into a community, which specifically something like a Community Benefits Agreement would demonstrate. Here, the community rallies around its demands of what is and isn't acceptable behavior for an outside corporation operating within its space. The success of a Cultural Nutrition Program would provide the community the political legitimacy it needs to advocate for itself.

On an individual level, a program like this is crucial to the self-development of these schools' children. We've established - that due to historical, oppressive factors that are in no way a fault of the child - students in these schools have been intentionally overlooked, dismissed, and deemed unworthy of investment. Having some part of their identity be connected and prioritized would actively encourage their self-esteem. Choosing empowerment through food builds mental resilience against things like imposter syndrome and physical resilience against hunger, agitation, and other interruptive agents against learning. Figures 2 and 3 provide a visual depiction of the opportunities and threats of the program and support why it should be adopted by other academic institutions.

**Interviews**

Should the city of Boston have several schools with BIPOC children that are adequately nourished and proud of themselves in the process, the city would have political force to be reckoned with. It would therefore be in the city's best interest to work with that political force instead of against it. In order to gain a better sense of clarity behind this long term vision and how this work was actively manifesting it, we tried to reach out to some of the change makers that made this program a possibility.

Unfortunately, given the limited timespan of our operations, we were not able to interview all of the people we wanted to get in contact with. One of those people was Viven Morris, a dietician consultant, who volunteers her time and experience for the ACI. Some of the questions we wanted to pose and ask her to get her experience and knowledge were: What is your background in nutrition (specifically youths) and how did you get involved with the ACI? What are some of the main issues that you see in the foods that are served in Hyde Park schools and surrounding communities? Is health the goal of food justice? Who determines what health is? How do we measure it? What do you think the average distance is before it becomes too far to get nutritious foods? What do you think are the biggest barriers to getting SNAP and WIC and then maintaining/living off of it? Should reducing children's sodium intake and minimizing their consumption of ingredients of concern be prioritized over cultural preferences? Why or why not?

We were able to get in touch with Marlon, our community partner, for an interview. Here were some of the questions we asked him: What are the next steps toward restorative justice? Who can get involved in this process? How does one seek restorative justice with different

communities outside of your own? When is restorative justice needed? What are some identifiers that highlight a community's need for change? What is Critical Race Theory? What is Redlining? What sparked Marlon into starting ACI? How do we look at our communities/as northeastern students, how can we make a change outside of the classroom?

Here were some interview highlights: in order to make change we have to teach the narrative of restorative justice (i.e. what does it mean?). Marlon emphasized the necessity of education about discrimination within school lunches and food accessibility for the public. In order to fix the problem, we must establish a baseline of how things should run, and correct the harm that was done in the past. Through the interview Marlon defined, and provided examples for, redlining, gentrification, and the Critical Race Theory. With these, he was able to teach and explain the ways in which the food system is unjust. He followed this with advice on how one makes change inside their community.

The Cultural Nutrition Program has major implications for the intersection between food and community organizing. We believe that this nexus holds the key to deeper, well-rounded, well-nourishing, long-term community development and should be adequately funded and supported in any way possible.



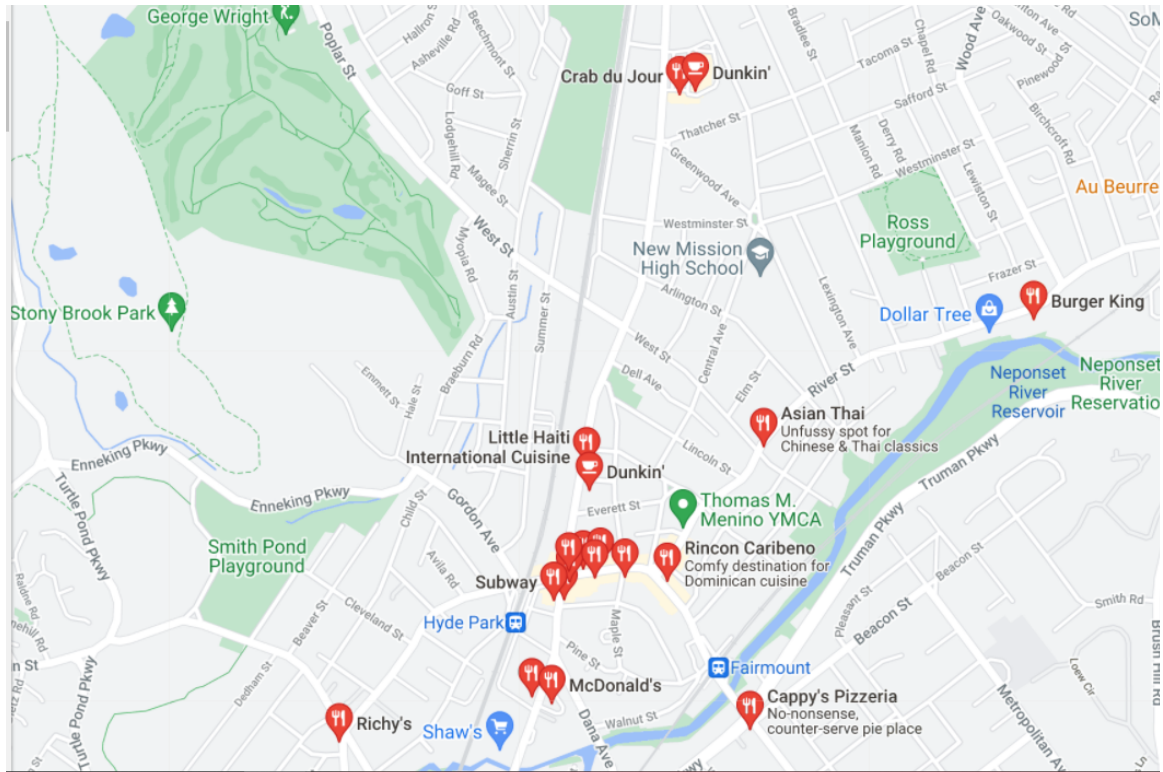
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**Figure 1:**

*Google Maps image detailing zip code radius of the saturation of fast food places near Boston*

*Public Charter School*



**Figure 2:***SWOT analysis of the Cultural Nutrition Program***Campaign S.W.O.T. Analysis:**

Strengths:	Weaknesses:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unique</li> <li>• Transparent</li> <li>• Sustainable: encourages long-term interaction and engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easily rejectable by the students &amp; community at large considering similar attempts have been made by other organizations</li> <li>• Easily able to be thwarted by more powerful entities, especially currently without a community benefits agreement</li> </ul>
Opportunities:	Threats:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Real-time, day-to-day feedback by students and staff</li> <li>• Increased public awareness of model and actionable advocacy steps</li> <li>• Could be used as a pre-test to assess viability should this be adopted elsewhere</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Campaign failure</li> <li>• Low engagement from both the students and the community at large</li> <li>• People not caring about the issue</li> <li>• People caring/interest in issue, but low behavioral change</li> <li>• Secondary target audience (parents of the students) being too busy, working and stuck in the cycle of poverty to engage</li> <li>• Ensuring familial privacy around data collection of participating cohort (vulnerable populations like minors and the potentially undocumented)</li> <li>• Active Institutional meddling from local corporations or any institution acting in their interests (lobbying groups, potentially the mayoral office etc.)</li> </ul>

**Figure 3:***PESTEL analysis of the Cultural Nutrition Program*



**P.E.S.T.E.L. Analysis:** An analysis and evaluation of ACI's external operating environment.

Political:	Economic:	Social:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attempts to persuade school board &amp; potentially district wide adoption of model; must understand failures of existing models in order to refute them</li> <li>• Regulation surrounding food may differ from school to school; must take into account with potential expansion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization's main purpose is cultural nutrition, given the inputs and ingredients, some may argue it's not economically viable</li> <li>• While model can work in all economic conditions, must take into account potential recessions that may affect school budgets, ACI donations, and investment capacity</li> <li>• Since about 40 million Americas live in poverty*, demand will remain high, regardless of competition, ultimately raising necessary social labor and costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization provides social networking and platform politically for like-minded individuals</li> <li>• Organization emphasizes and harnesses the power of community</li> <li>• Organization attempts to eradicate the social stigma and stereotypes around poverty, and food insecurity (i.e. laziness, financial incompetence etc.)</li> </ul>
Technological:	Environmental:	Legal:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizes the UpTogether fund to lists details of families expenditures and possibly linked to bank accounts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization should research sustainability of locations and partner relationships</li> <li>• Organizations should research sustainability of land in communities they</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization must operate with the 501 (c) (3) legal code as a non-profit</li> <li>• Organization must submit accurate</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• must be technologically responsible and protect families' data cyberly and protect family data (i.e. anonymizing data reports)</li></ul>	serve should they expand to local growing ventures or point community members to another organization that knows that information as most of the people served concurrently don't have the capacity to. Passing on this information could help relieve issue of access to healthy food should the program not be adopted for whatever reason	financial statements (i.e. Form 990) as required by the Internal Revenue System (IRS)
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Figure 4:

*Example recipes from the finished cultural calendar*

Haitian Rice & Black Bean Sauce (Sos Pwa)	Puerto Rican Pollo Con Arroz
	
<p><b>INGREDIENTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1½ cup uncooked beans</li><li>• 4½-5 cups water</li><li>• 2 garlic cloves</li><li>• ½ bell pepper</li><li>• ½ onion</li><li>• 1 piment bouc (option, very spicy)</li><li>• 1 thyme sprig</li><li>• salt &amp; pepper to taste</li><li>• 1 tbsp vegetable oil</li></ul>	<p><b>INGREDIENTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2 tablespoons olive oil, divided</li><li>• 1 pound boneless skinless chicken pieces (breast or thighs, whichever you prefer)</li><li>• 1 cup long-grain brown rice</li><li>• ½ cup sofrito</li><li>• ½ teaspoon ground cumin</li><li>• ¼ cup pitted olives, quartered</li><li>• 4 oz tomato sauce (unsalted)</li><li>• Salt and black pepper to taste</li><li>• 2 tablespoons fresh thyme</li></ul>
<p><b>MEAL OPTIONS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Serve with brown rice</li><li>• Serve with avocado salad:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ 2 Avocados Peeled and cut in squares</li><li>◦ 1 Onion chopped</li><li>◦ 1/2 Lime juiced</li><li>◦ 1 Tsp Olive Oil</li><li>◦ 1/2 tsp pepper</li><li>◦ 1/2 tsp Salt (or to taste)</li></ul></li></ul>	<p><b>MEAL OPTIONS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vegetarian: Cauliflower or tofu instead of chicken</li></ul>
<p><a href="#">Recipe</a> <a href="#">Salad Recipe</a></p>	<p><a href="#">Recipe</a></p>