Buy Local, Buy Black

Using Data Science to Help a Grocery Store Co-Op Deliver on its Commitments to Racial Equity

Problem

Grocery store co-ops have made commitments of social equity by working with and supporting black-owned farms that have historically struggled to get by. Finding demographic information of farm owners and operators has been a challenge for them due to lack of public databases with this information.





Weavers Way is a member-owned cooperative grocery store in Greater Philadelphia region. Like many other food retailers, Weavers Way desires to diversify its supply chain with a focus on patronizing businesses owned by racial minorities.

Solution

We made finding minority-owned food producers easier by sourcing data to create a searchable database of prospective local food producers to be used by department buyers and customers.

The database includes other small businesses such as food hubs. Our database will be provided to Weavers Way and can be utilized by other local cooperators that want to support small and minority businesses.

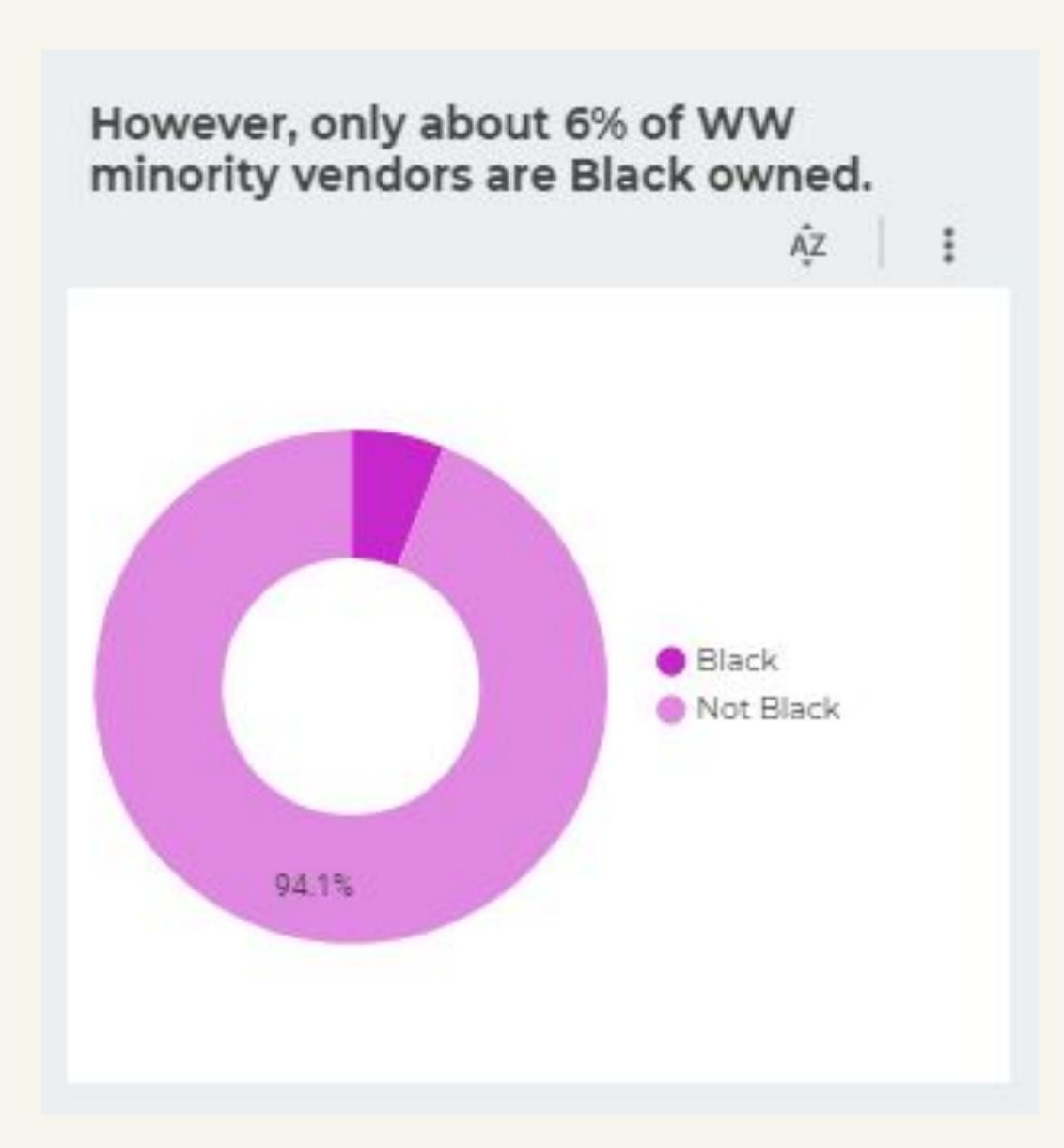


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Data

We utilized publicly-available databases to visualize the demographic distribution of all food producers within a 200 mile radius of the co-op. We used community maintained databases of Black and BIPOC-owned farms and merged them into a single database. Weavers Way provided the demographic information of their vendors which we visualized in Google Data Studio.





Source: Weavers Way

Challenges

Certain databases provided product listings but not demographic information, and others did the opposite.

This meant a considerable amount of information was unavailable and other aspects had to be found manually.

Finding black-owned farms within the specified region was particularly difficult as 90% of black-owned farms exist in southern states outside of the region local to the co-op.

Method

We created a searchable database in which a department buyer looking for a specific type of product can find a list of possible vendors.

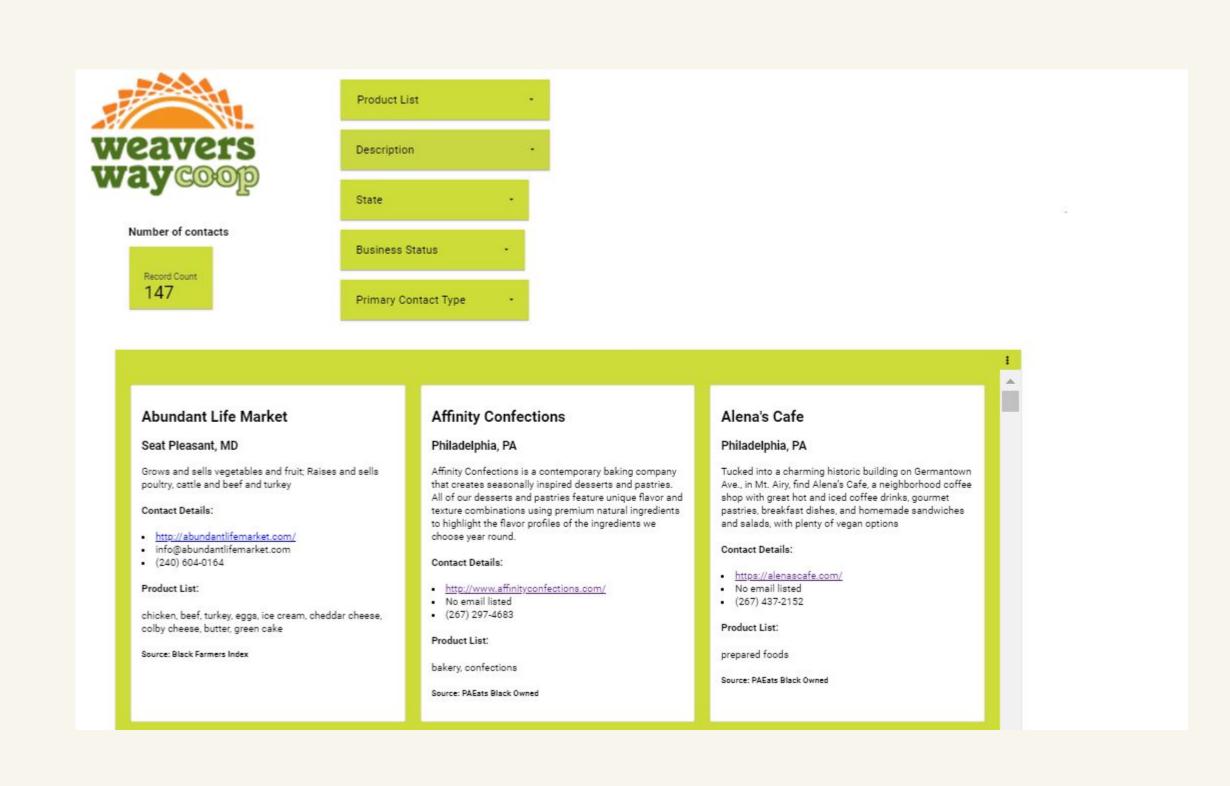
The database includes phone numbers, emails, websites, and social media by which the vendor can be contacted.

The database also includes if a vendor produces organic produce and demographic information about the vendors where available.

Source: Weavers Way

Findings and Results

Source: USDA

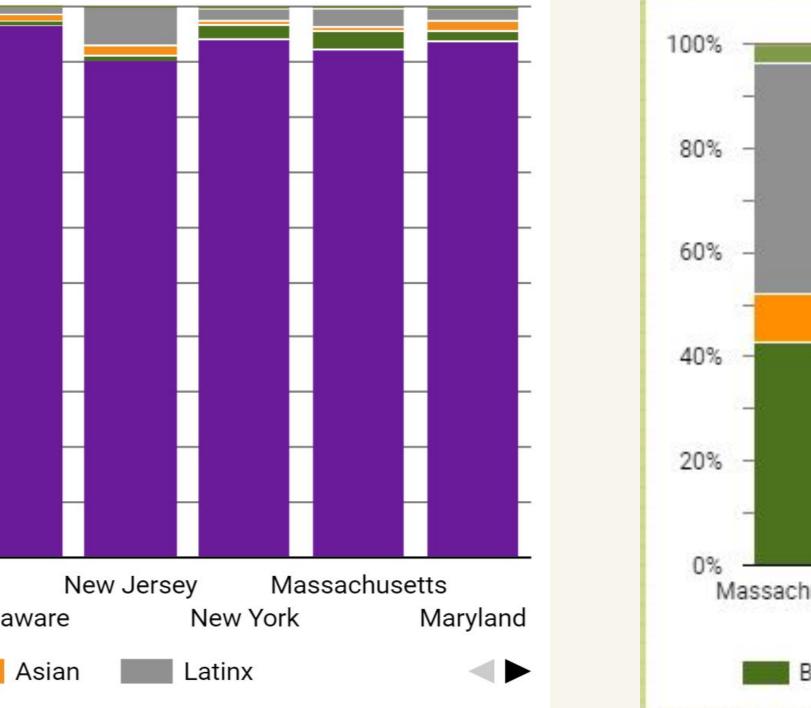


Limitations

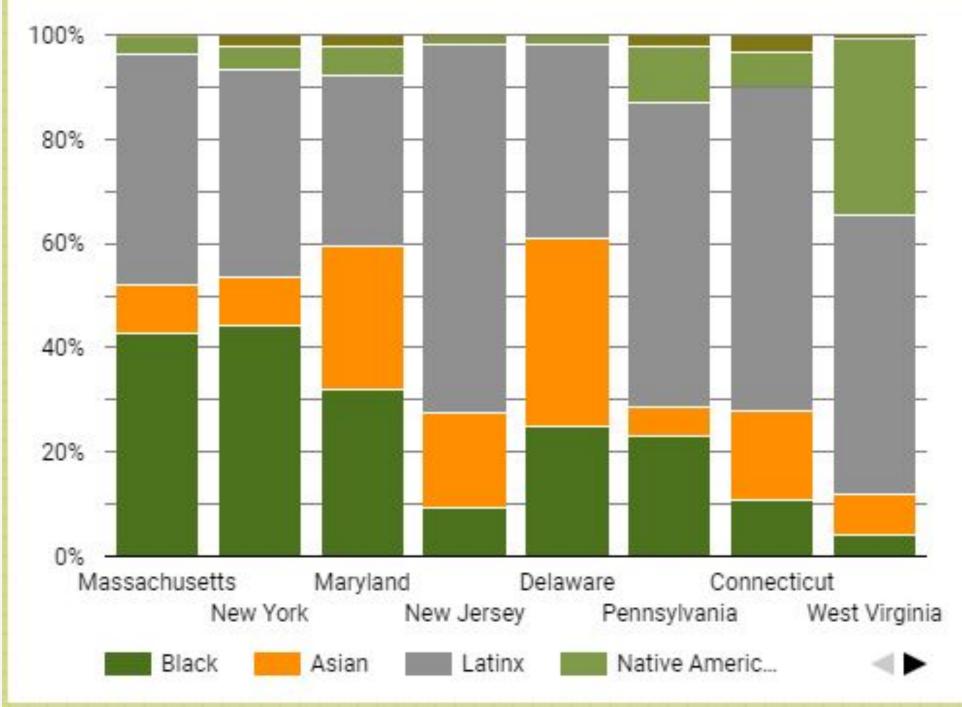
Due to the product information of the farms having to be found manually, it is understood that there could be missing entries in the products listed.

Highlights

- Weavers Way currently has a survey system in which prospect vendors identify themselves; most prefer not to identify their demographics
- The searchable database contains approximately 500 unique types of produce and 123 minority-owned producers
- The efforts of this project added 400 hours of capacity to the diversity vendor workstream, giving a diversity vendor coordinator a 1.5 year head start



All demographics per State vs Non-White Demographics per State



Based on USDA census data, farms in these 9 states are over 95% white-owned, hence why Weavers Way has had a difficult time finding prospective vendors. New York and Massachusetts have the largest percentage of black producers.

> The database of minority-owned 123 unique food producers. It provides information the location of the city, state, and the farm's website.