



Penne for Your Thoughts: The Near West Side Grocery Challenge

One thing that we know local residents, employees, and students agree on – it’s about “thyme” we had a grocery store here! A great neighborhood cannot exist without healthy food options – but there are so many options that could work for all of the different groups who live, work, and visit the Near West Side. To help us determine the best approaches, we are putting some of our best minds to work – Marquette students – and launching a Near West Side Grocery Challenge.

Throughout this semester, Marquette students will have the opportunity to explore ideas and help generate innovative, sustainable approaches that provide affordable access to fresh foods for students and the Near West Side community. Students will meet with local experts, community members, anchor organizations, and engage fellow students as they design solutions. We will be piloting some of the best ideas next fall semester.

Students can focus their efforts in one of six areas: small foot print stores – west & east side of the Near West Side; food pantry for students and community, leverage existing retail spaces (corner stores, gas stations via purchasing power); co-ops; alternative grocery models such as delivery and mobile; and food literacy.

The Challenge: How It Works

Teams will have day-to-day support from a team of Marquette staff and some overarching guidance from key University Leadership, Near West Side staff, and others interested in supporting the Challenge. In addition, student teams can participate in a speed networking event featuring local grocery experts to get feedback on ideas and suggestions for next steps.

At the end of the semester, teams will pitch their recommendations and ideas to a panel of judges (consisting of MU Leadership, Near West Side anchors, grocery/food experts, and community members). Judges and Marquette leadership will evaluate all ideas and help select one or more to pilot in the fall semester. “Winning” teams and ideas will receive seed funding to implement the pilots. Interested students can apply to be a summer grocery fellow and keep working on their idea.

What to Expect in the Next Month

Marquette will host a grocery kickoff in the Alumni Memorial Union on January 31st at 3:00 pm. The next month will consist of a deep dive around grocery/food systems. Anyone interested in participating can expect to learn more about the Near West Side neighborhood, understand the complexities of the grocery store business, and discover innovative models that are currently being piloted in other cities. Students will also participate in cultural sensitivity training before engaging with residents at the next NeON meeting (February 20th).

Outcome

The goal is to generate innovative, affordable, and sustainable models to bring fresh foods to the Near West Side and pilot a variety of ideas to determine the appropriate mix of fresh food retail options. We want grocery options that are inclusive to everyone who calls the Near West Side home – and change the narrative around “grocery”.

The Grocery Challenge is aimed at Marquette students but anchors and Near West Side partners are invited to be collaborators. If interested, please contact Kelsey Otero (Kelsey.oter@marquette.edu).