Tompkins County
Food Security for All

The Challenge
In Tompkins County approximately 1 in 6 households where all the children are aged 0–5 live below the poverty level. In the City of Ithaca this number increases to almost 100 percent in the case of single mothers with all children under 5. Children in this age range living in poverty are at risk of food insecurity, obesity, and nutrient deficiencies that can have negative consequences lasting a lifetime. Low-income single mothers are subject to numerous challenges in adopting and maintaining healthful behaviors for their families. These include lack of access to healthy, affordable foods; limited resources (including time, childcare, disposable income, and the restrictions of government assistance programs); cycles of stress, anxiety, and depression; fewer opportunities for physical activity; greater exposure to marketing of obesity-promoting products, and limited access to health care.

Our Goals and How Students Contribute
Our association’s ECCESP proposal has the goal of facilitating both short-term and long-term solutions to the above challenges in accordance with our mission to put knowledge to work for the sake of the community’s wellbeing. Specifically, this proposal builds on and augments existing CCE Tompkins’ food security programming — which includes federally funded nutrition education, and subsidized shares for Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) — to provide engaged-learning experiences that intend to help students and the community tackle this very real problem. Currently, our Healthy Food for All (HFFA) program subsidizes CSA shares for low-income mothers when they agree to participate in our educational opportunities around nutrition, fresh food preparation/preservation, and other healthy food security matters. Our proposal is to facilitate engaged relationships between students and the single mothers of children 0–5 through having students become involved in all aspects of that programming. This work will involve — but is not limited to — research, producing educational materials, and interactive presentations. In this way the students are concerned with producing measurable improvements in a number of healthy eating indicators.

Interwoven with the above engaged learning activities, students will be learning from the mothers (and other context and content experts) about the individual, familial, and structural barriers mothers face when trying to achieve the food-related goals they have for themselves and their children. This understanding will be used to develop proposals and policies — which students then work to have implemented — as part of a larger project to produce sustainable solutions to Ithaca’s food security challenges.

What the students bring to the community is time and access to resources which enable them to support the whole community in its collective attempts to understand and think through these complex issues. Students will be involved in producing educational and/or policy-oriented materials in an effort to increase individual and community capacity in this area. To what extent individual students focus on the differing aspects of the above — e.g., listening, dialogue, educational delivery, analysis, policy formulation, presentation, implementation, and so on — will be determined through initial and iterative discussions with faculty and students.
Please note that the engaged learning opportunities offered by this proposal can accommodate undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional students’ interests.

Community Partners
To broaden and deepen this learning experience students will work not only with the mothers involved directly in the above HFFA programming, but also with a new support and advocacy group for single mothers with children (Sista4Sista) organized by Southside Community Center. As one of our partners in this project, Southside will convene a number of special student-oriented meetings on the themes of food security and related policy. Students will participate in these discussions and will have the opportunity to achieve greater understanding of the social realities of food security. They will also be offered a space to present and receive feedback on their related proposals. Based on the results of these dialogues, CCE Tompkins and Southside intend that there will be future policy-informing collaborations between our student-related programs and themselves.

Assessment of Impacts
As noted above, this student project intends immediate benefits for family members as well as taking a systemic capacity-building approach to the issue. At the individual and familial level, benefits are assessed via an evaluation of the HFFA single-mother household project participants. This will be completed in accordance with the established evaluation procedure of CCE Tompkins’ subsidized share CSA program (Healthy Food for All). Participants complete a pre-and post-season survey that measures the consumption of fresh produce (quantity and variety), familiarity of, and comfort level with preparing locally grown produce, and the qualitative impact of participating in the program on their lives. Feedback is also collected to measure the effectiveness and usefulness of educational resources (tools/classes/workshops) through surveys and informal interviews.

The evaluation method adopted for the more systemic capacity-building and policy-oriented elements of the student project will depend (to an extent) on the precise nature and duration of the project itself. Broadly speaking, however, we anticipate that there will be an evaluation of how the mothers feel about the proposals developed by the students; the community members’ actual or intended participation in those; the students’ demonstrated understanding of the barriers to and requirements for that participation; the credibility and sustainability of anticipated results; and, if policies are enacted, the results of those in the lives of the participants, and future prospects for the same. This evaluation will be carried out with the participation of the HFFA program participants, as well as the Sista4Sista group at Southside Community Center.

Roles, Responsibilities, and Supervision
CCE Tompkins (including HFFA) and Southside Community Center staff will facilitate student interactions with the mothers in a number of contexts. Our nutrition programming leader, along with our student and community coordinator, will oversee student engagement with CSA programming, as well as this project’s relation with Southside Community Center.

In our project supervision role, CCE Tompkins’ staff will work together to apply best practices in implementing food security strategies:
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- recruiting local participants; maintaining participant engagement;
- helping students become informed by the participants’ needs and challenges;
- manage any work in our certified teaching kitchen facility;
- provide support for students in developing materials and proposals for individual and community-capacity building;
- build students’ understanding of the importance of grassroots participation in any sustainable solutions; and
- we will evaluate impact.

The meetings at Southside Community Center will provide an additional invaluable resource on the realities of food security alongside providing a forum for ideas to be presented, critiqued, and developed. The students’ experiences there will be facilitated by the executive assistant, a single mother and Cornell graduate herself.

Community Engagement Beyond the Funding Period
If students and/or faculty wish to continue their involvement with the project’s goals in the future, we are more than willing to work with them since our programming on local food security will be expanding and intensifying in the coming years. More immediately, we have a small student-led HFFA project commencing in 2016 which the ECCESP students may segue into for the purposes of continuing their engagement.

For those students and faculty wishing to expand their work outside Tompkins County, we anticipate a deepening relationship with other CCE associations on HFFA-related matters. Recent preliminary discussions with other Associations suggest there are significant benefits to be gained through pooling different associations’ resources on HFFA’s educational materials and in sharing related program data. In this way we hope this and similar projects will bring benefits to extension associations system-wide. These collaborations will in turn help facilitate potentially state-wide data sets and research projects for faculty and students.

Multidisciplinary Approaches
Through developing students’ relationships with HFFA and Southside Community Center, students will have the opportunity to learn about the social realities of food insecurity, build project management and community organizing skills, engage in non-profit operation, formulate policy proposals, and work towards implementation. Our association is involved with these issues on many levels and it is our desire that the multidisciplinary approaches driving this proposal will attract a diverse range of students and faculty.

Faculty from the Department of Development Sociology and the Division of Nutritional Sciences have expressed interest in this and similar projects, but the range of faculty interests that could work within this project’s boundaries are extremely broad (e.g., public administration, public policy, race and equity, economies, education, and more). Responding to any possible intersection of interests — both in this project, and in related initiatives to come — our association programming can expand to work with students and faculty in mutually beneficial ways.
Team Members
Chris Kai-Jones
chj7@cornell.edu
CCE-Tompkins
Student and Community Coordinator

Lara Kaltman, MPH, RD
ljp9@cornell.edu
CCE-Tompkins
Family & Community Well-Being Issue Leader

Elizabeth Karabinakis
ev4@cornell.edu
CCE-Tompkins (HFFA)
Director, Healthy Food For All