



### Abstract

This piece will discuss a variety of concerns international students encounter when acknowledging cultural differences. Student's removed from their traditional lives and looking through the lens of food within an academic setting shows an interesting concern. The author of this piece gives personal detail on why food has been chosen as a topic of interest. A summary of the most important components gleaned from research is conducted. Demonstrating the significance of food for international students from a cultural perspective sheds light on a wide variety of issues surrounding food that are not considered by academic institutions. The importance of food transcends many areas of social interaction. An awareness of food from a dining and campus culture perspective is portrayed for community colleges and educational leaders.

### Food For Thought

There are cultural differences that must be thought through for international students. International students have a strong presence in the United States. "In 2011, there were over 4.3 million international students studying worldwide. International students attending universities in the United States accounted for the highest percentage (17%) of international students all over the world" (Alakaam et al, 2015, p.104). The diverse backgrounds of international students are starting to gain attention in relation to food consumption.

International students change many components of their food choices in pursuing an education in

another country. In a review of the challenges, international students may be exposed to changes in a variety of areas such as dietary, deviations in mealtimes and routines, and health concerns, which demonstrate to educational leaders how significantly students are impacted. The importance of how food affects the experience of an international student must be examined.

### The Reason and Importance of Food

The author of this piece chose food as a topic due to familial upbringing. The parents of the author grew up with very little food. One parent was raised in the mountains of Greece during the German-Turkish alliance when Germany invaded Greece. One chicken egg was used to feed seven siblings. The other parent grew up in a Catholic Charities group home with minimal food choices and offerings. This led to an idea of safety and security in having an abundance of food in the pantry as a comfort to the family home. Family gatherings with a wide variety of foods were common. Weight, health, and social settings were all affected by this upbringing. This background information built the foundation for the author of reviewing how food is perceived for international students as they pursue education in an unfamiliar setting. Living and making decisions on options with contrasted possibilities for nourishment and leisure then they are accustomed to. This also ties into the community college setting and serving student populations.

The international student experience can be challenging. Food in the United States is prepared differently than an international student is familiar

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with. A student's health can be affected if the routine and eating habits they are used to are disrupted. International students can end up feeling isolated, skip meals, eat poorly, and pick up bad eating habits during the time they are studying. "What if you're put in a situation where you eat unfamiliar foods for all three meals every day for a year, maybe even four? That's often what it's like to be an international student and eating in dining halls" (Agrawal, 2015). The behavioral changes that occur with international students illustrate a negative acculturation. As individuals in a new setting, many changes can occur for international students surrounding the impact of food.

### **Most Important Elements**

An international student must work through many changes concerning food. Changes range from lack of familiarity, time (skipping meals), and access to ingredients. Three main changes that must be considered are an international student's geographic location (from which they are familiar with), access (food options), and dietary practices that could cause health concerns.

Cultural differences can also be geographically related. Understanding these differences may be an area educational leaders should focus on. Time frame in eating meals is a noted example with living habits due to geographic location. An example of this can be seen with students from Middle Eastern countries. "A major cultural difference has been observed where it is more common for restaurants to remain open later . . . because of the local climate – because it is cooler in the late-evening and early morning hours" (Kusek, 2015, pp.127-128). Similar examples are demonstrated with breakfast times and types of nutrition available.

International students who attempt to purchase their own groceries have limited access and options for food selection. "The only place outside of campus acknowledged by all students . . . was Walmart because most of them later mentioned this is where they shop for groceries" (Kusek, 2015, pp.127-128). Another factor that affects international students is overall access to transportation and proximity to restaurants with familiar food options, particularly in rural areas. For international students in dorms this can become a true concern. "It is especially hard for international students to find food over breaks due to things like lack of transportation, cold weather,

and off-campus food suppliers" (Creed, 2014). Familiar food choices may be present but out of the range of resources for an international student.

Health of students due to effects of dietary practices has been noted in research. "The food detriments that affected participants' dietary practices include food availability, price, storage (in terms of food's shelf life and space to store food), as well as food preparation issues" (O'Sullivan, 2016, p.118). Food preparation issues relate to the differences in ingredients. As noted in a survey of students, eating habits change. The amounts of foods, types, and eating patterns are all affected. Survey participants noted less and more consumption of :

Fruits and vegetables, as well as fast food. Some participants also suggested that their new diet had caused weight change. . . Almost all participants admitted that they had more regular eating patterns at home (O'Sullivan, 2016, p.111)

Added to the health concerns and dietary changes are irregular eating patterns where international students get in the habit of skipping either breakfast or lunch, sometimes both. This practice can impact the health of students.

### **Recent Survey Data and the Community College Landscape**

A study performed in spring 2021 by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas includes insight from students within three community colleges. (Weissman, 2022) discusses these findings and the drastic financial impact food has on community college students. "The report, released Wednesday, found that a fifth of students cut back on skipped meals in the month prior to the survey because of costs. Almost a third of respondents ran out of food and didn't have the money to buy more during that time" (Weissman, 2022). Other factors mentioned relative to the survey included the costs of food, housing, daycare and transportation. Community colleges can potentially build relief and services for students within their strategic plans.

Quintana (2022) discusses a survey of 80,000 community college students. The most notable challenge for community colleges seems to be communicating the availability of food and other resources to the student population. "Of the rough 50,000 students on these campuses, only about 40% of students knew their institutions provided food, and 9%

of respondents incorrectly said their campuses didn't have such a resource" (Quintana, 2022). Community college settings will need to get resourceful on how the available resources could be attained. Calling on a College wide approach. "That may mean tasking a college adviser with informing students about a college's food pantry or having instructors include that information in their course materials" (Quintana, 2022).

### **Impact on Educational Leaders and the Application of New Information**

The implications of food could be a larger issue soon for educational leaders to address as the number of international students continues to increase. It would be in the best interest of academic institutions to be cognizant of the need to educate the international student population at their campuses. Academic institutions will recruit more students, which in turn will add more diversity. Education relative to nutrition, and the differences in foods that will be available, would benefit international students.

As academic institutions move future-forward from the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators within academic institutions must pay closer attention to the needs of their student populations. "Among food-insecure students, fewer than half said the college helped them attain food in the month prior to the survey" (Weissman, 2022).

The student dining experience should be considered by educational leadership. There are several options that would make an impact on food accessibility for international students. The first would be academic institutions creating partnerships with local ethnic food stores. "Ethnic food stores could be invited to campus" (Alakaam et al, 2015, p.116). This type of partnership would benefit the local community as well as the international student population. The second would be an international dining hall experience which involves student feedback:

Serving more international foods in dining halls is a wonderful idea, as long as the food is prepared in the most authentic way possible. Increasing the availability and authenticity of cultural food would help international students feel more at home and welcome in the residence halls. It would provide domestic students with opportunities to learn about cultures and countries. It would be food that we not only survive off of, but live with and enjoy. (Agrawal, 2015)

The dining hall experience could be very beneficial, and generate a profit for an academic institution. If the students live in dorms, and are on meal plans there is an area of opportunity in serving students food that is familiar. Having an opportunity to give feedback, and create cultural enrichment is a positive educational experience for all the students.

From a community college perspective, creative approaches toward meeting the needs of students may be available:

For example, Ozarks-Technical Community College in Missouri offers free breakfast to its student body five days a week, and the North East Texas Community College Care Center houses a food pantry, a mini kitchen and a closet with personal hygiene supplies, and it also offers opportunities for peer mentorship and group mental health therapy sessions. (Weissman, 2022)

Academic institutions must leave no stone unturned in seeking resources for their student populations. Exhausting all options, seeking out local partnerships and building campus culture and identity for students will build the needed bridges toward student success. Community colleges are not in a position to lose students that are motivated to seek an academic journey toward needed skill sets and future employment opportunities.

### **A Local Community Colleges Perspective**

Community college settings must become resourceful with their local partners and promote the resources that are available to their student populations. Within the State of North Carolina, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College publicly highlights a market style food and resource pantry. Listing detailed time frames of availability as well as the opportunity to schedule an appointment if needed. The purpose of the food pantry is to "provide temporary food assistance to Rowan-Cabarrus students at no cost. The College aims to decrease the impact of food insecurity among our students" (Rowan-Cabarrus Campus Market (Food & Resource Pantry). International students are also utilizing the colleges food and resource pantry:

The Campus Market is available to all enrolled students on an unlimited basis. We do have staff available to assist and students can make an appointment to visit by emailing studentwellness@rccc.edu . I am aware of international students visiting and seeking the food and campus

resources toward tutoring. This campus initiative for our students directly correlates to retention factors. (Moler, M. (2023, August 15). Rowan Cabarrus Community College [Personal interview]).

Rowan-Cabarrus Community College also accepts donations for the pantry. Students may also volunteer or assist in the pantry through work study opportunities. This has created a scaffolded approach to a committed student and campus culture.

### Conclusion

The experience of an international student is greatly impacted by food. Three main areas of concern are an international student's geographic location which they are familiar with, access to food options, and dietary practices that could cause health concerns. Within the community college setting specific, communicating available resources and seeking creative avenues for assets is paramount to serving a post COVID-19 student experience. Innovative food and resource pantries mirroring Rowan-Cabarrus Community College may be the blue print for student success and campus retention.

Educational leadership must think through methods of educating international students, creating an awareness of these changes to their food. Academic institutions continue to have an increase in international students. Thinking differently about dining hall services and food options could potentially be a beneficial educational and cultural method of positive acculturation for educational leaders to pursue.

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### Author's Note

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