

# What is The International Students' Experience of On-Campus Dining?

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## Literature Review

The literature on international students' dining experiences highlights a growing awareness of the unique challenges this demographic faces in adapting to campus dining options. Prior research emphasized the significance of cultural backgrounds (Noyongoyo, 2023) and dietary habits (Alakaam & Willyard, 2020) in shaping their preferences and satisfaction with available food choices. Additionally, studies also emphasize the potential impact on the physical health and well-being of international students (Shi et al., 2021), along with the crucial role that campus dining services play in influencing their social interactions and community integration (Pradhananga et al., 2023). This study used a qualitative approach to examining the dining experience of international students.

## Methods

The research question that guided this study is, what is the international student experience of on-campus dining? The study used a basic qualitative research method for its design. This study was conducted in a comprehensive regional university in the Southeastern United States. I interviewed three (3) international students from Chile, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Two students live on campus and one student lives off campus. The interviews were audio-recorded, with an average time of 25 minutes. All the participants are undergraduates.

## Analysis

The data were analyzed using a priori coding to determine themes. The beginning codes were dietary adjustment, health and well-being, food insecurity, academic performance, and social integration. These codes were based on the research question and literature of O'Sullivan & Amirabdollahian (2016), and Alakaam & Willyard (2020). Five major themes were found as a result of the analysis: adaptation, health and well-being, social dynamics, dietary adjustment, and expectations for improvement.

## Introduction

There are over 1 million international students in the United States. The dining experiences of these students can contribute to their overall satisfaction with their institutions and their cultural transition to the United States (Buell, 2021). This research project investigated the on-campus dining experiences of international students, with a focus on dietary changes and the challenges they face in adapting to unfamiliar food environments. By examining the dining experiences, this research seeks to improve the overall quality of dining services for international students, ultimately contributing to their academic success and well-being.



## Findings

Five major themes were found in this study: dissatisfaction with the dietary adjustment; missing home cuisines and the familiar comfort of their respective countries; concerns about the impact of campus food on their health and well-being; the social dynamics in their new environment; and the desire for greater variety in food options. These findings are crucial as they encapsulate the core experiences and concerns of international students regarding campus dining.

## Discussion

The findings illuminate the deep connection international students maintain between their food, culture and identity. Despite their resilience in adapting to campus dining, students have reservations, emphasizing a desire for more variety and healthier options. These findings echo previous literature, particularly Pilli & Slater's (2021) study on food experiences and dietary patterns of international students at a Canadian university. These insights reinforce the importance of inclusive dining initiatives to enhance the overall well-being and satisfaction of international students.

## Implications

Understanding a country's food is essential to understanding its culture. There is a need for institutions to acknowledge the cultural and dietary transitions that international students undergo upon arriving in the United States. The implication here is that campus dining services should be attuned to the diverse cultural preferences of their international student population, striving to provide options that bridge the gap between home cuisines and the available offerings on campus.

## References

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