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Foodways: An Ethnographic Analysis of CWU International Students' Perception of the Role of Culturally Relevant Food in Their Sense of Belonging

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FOODWAYS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF CWU INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY
RELEVANT FOOD IN THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

Cultural and Environmental Resource Management

by

Joy Ugonna Ihuka

May 2024

CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

FOODWAYS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF CWU INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT FOOD IN THEIR SENSE OF BELONGING

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International students face unique challenges adjusting to new academic environments, including developing a sense of homesickness and lack of belonging. Studies have shown that consuming culturally relevant food helps international students relieve homesickness, fostering a sense of belonging. Curiously, nonetheless, literature on student belonging rarely focuses on food. Within this gap, this thesis explores the significance of culturally relevant food in fostering a sense of belonging among international students at Central Washington University. Using ethnographic interviews, this research examines how culturally relevant food (including how food is prepared) or lack thereof may influence international students' perceptions of belonging. This study identifies challenges such as lack of representation and alienation and their impact on international students' sense of self and how these issues may affect their academic performance. The findings suggest that culturally relevant food plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging, aiding in coping with homesickness and enhancing students' academic performance.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My journey from Nigeria to Ellenburg to pursue a Master of Science degree in Cultural and Environmental Resource Management, taking over 40 hours of flight and bus time, was rich with excitement and a touch of fear. I ended up starving myself because I could not eat during this journey. So, I waited eagerly to arrive at my school campus (what I hoped would be my home for the next two years of study) to get something to eat. Sadly, I arrived at campus in the middle of the night and had to go to sleep with a hungry tummy. The following day, I started to work on my paperwork and academic documentation as every other international student did. This start was as intense as anyone can imagine--getting used to a new culture, weather, educational system, people, and place. Especially if hungry. So, when I couldn't bear the hunger any further, I asked to be shown places on campus to find something to eat. I was told I could find food in different locations inside the Student Union and Recreation Center (SURC). The prospect of a diversity of food options seemed enticing.

Once I reached the SURC, I looked for something familiar to eat. Sure, I was open to trying new things, but amid my initial cultural shock, I appetized something familiar—that made me relate to home. Neither the “Mexican”, “Italian” “Asian” or “American” menus available spoke to me. Growing up in Nigeria's Niger Delta region — rooted in rich cultural traditions— whose culinary staples include ingredients like yams, plantains, and cassava, I found that none of these were present at the SURC—much less the more significant cultural ways in which they are prepared. Nothing here represented me.

Aside from being hungry, I was disappointed; in fact, I felt unwelcome on campus. In a visceral reaction, I thought that if I could not find food that I could eat, it might be that the kind of person I am was not welcome on campus. Stubbornly, I remained hungry for the next two weeks, barely eating anything from the food courts on campus until my family could ship food to me from home. It was expensive, but its meaning and relevance were priceless. I was homesick; I wanted to go back home. In my culture, food is not just food; it is love, and love is where home is. It evokes memories of home and is connected to people, places, and events shaping our lives. During this period, I could not concentrate in class; I was distracted by the pangs of hunger and the thought that people like me may not be welcomed on campus. It was scary to think that this would be my home for the study duration, and I was mentally and emotionally distressed.

Unfortunately, this experience seems far from unique to me. It appears to be a shared experience among the international students I have encountered on campus. I have met others who feel the same way I did, who cannot find their foodways and are left with no other option than to consume foods that do not soothe them. During my research, one recurrent statement I saw in their voices was how they were not considered in the food decisions made on campus. This made them feel unseen and unimportant.

This shared struggle among international students on the CWU Ellensburg campus points out a significant gap in the cultural inclusivity of the campus environments, especially in food services. The impact of culturally relevant food on international students' emotional and psychological well-being calls for academic investigation and institutional policy adjustment. While international students explore the food in their new environment, they also want to be connected to and retain their culture and identity. According to Stewin (2013), food revitalizes

the identity of international students who live in a new environment when their sense of self is threatened; therefore, the accessibility and availability of culturally relevant foods are essential to maintaining international students' cultural identity and food security—not to mention, to assure their academic success. In the fall of 2023, CWU welcomed about 300 international students from 54 countries worldwide. While numbers-wise, this enrollment rate is considerable, it is not enough to enroll these students but to provide the required services and programming.

Garcia et al. (2019) have defined "servingness" in the context of a higher education institution as a multidimensional and conceptual approach to meeting the needs of racially minoritized students. According to the authors, simply enrolling these students is not enough - the focus should be on serving or meeting their needs. One of the key indicators of "servingness" is the experiences that validate and positively impact the sense of belonging of these students who belong to racial minorities. According to Ingram (2012), students' sense of belonging at school involves feeling accepted, respected, included, and supported in a learning environment.

International students can access several services at CWU related to servingness. Various student clubs and organizations exist on campus, from origin-based clubs like the African Students Association (CWU ASA), Black Students Association (BSA), and the Asian University American Program (AUAP) with Friends offering an avenue to foster a sense of belonging to students with these origins and interest-based clubs such as the swimming, Cycling, and Biology clubs allowing students to explore their passions, develop leadership skills, and grow personally, professionally, and socially.

Additionally, the Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) organizes trips and tours, taking international students within and outside the city to experience sites of nature and

explore places, and holds an international Social quarterly event where they provide an avenue for international students to play games and have fun and snacks and drinks provided offering them a chance to connect with other students event an event called International Café. It promotes cultural sensitivity between international and domestic students, allowing students to meet and exchange ideas and guiding them to work together toward community engagement roles and leadership. The Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) hosts the parade of flags to kick off the International Education Week. During this event, international students parade the campus with their countries' flags and ensure that every country represented on campus is featured. The programs and events by the Office of International Studies and Programs (OISP) are designed to expose international students to the local culture and teach domestic students about the cultures of international students. However, nothing has been done to help international students perform their cultural and spiritual food practices or foodways, which allows them to maintain their cultural identity.

Food is cultural and ritualistic. It symbolizes how people define themselves and how they connect to their culture. It involves what is eaten, how those ingredients are prepared, and in which context. To highlight the above, let me share the day Holmes Dining offered Jollof Rice on their menu, a rice dish from West Africa. Of course, other students from West Africa and I were excited. I had never seen such happiness in them before this day, and we sat around the dining table and told stories in excitement. This is a common food practice from home. We felt proud to see other students from diverse nationalities eating and enjoying “our’ food. The food was not perfect; it did not taste like what we had at home (as it was prepared differently); however, we were grateful to find it on the menu. We felt seen and heard and had a sudden sense

of belonging we had not felt on campus until then. We appreciated the thought and effort and wished it was frequently on the menu and improved. However, our joy was short-lived, as we never saw it on the menu again. This experience deepened my understanding and appreciation for the intricate connections between culture and human experience. In this context, this research explores, in an ultimate instance, inclusivity, sustainability, well-being, and equity. It seeks to ensure that school administration creates a more just and equitable campus environment that values cultural diversity and considers the well-being of all its members, aligning with the principles of environmental justice.

Research Problem

Human migration involves the movement of people from one geographical location to another. Humans migrate for several reasons, including, but not limited to, war, harsh climatic conditions, economic reasons, and education (Castelli 2018). International education has been a leading driver of migration in recent years, and one such destination for international students is the United States. The United States educational institutions, especially its institutions of higher education, receive about a million international students yearly from all over the world (Statista, 2023). International students contributed \$33.8 billion to the economy of the United States in the 2021-2022 academic year (NAFSA 2022). Therefore, meeting international students' needs is fundamental. Student belonging is the feeling of acceptance, safety, inclusion, and respect within a learning environment (Gray 2021).

Students' sense of belonging at a higher education institution is essential for students' involvement on campus, academic performance, mental well-being, and graduation (Ingram

2012). Food is cultural. It ties together cultures and is vital to cultural heritage and identity. Hence, it constitutes a crucial component of belonging. When relocating, many refugees and immigrants can lose connections to their traditional foods (Beatrice 2021). However, much literature on student belonging focuses on different dimensions of the concept, but not much of this literature addresses belonging directly through food. A few studies have been done on belonging and food in a few higher education institutions in Canada and the United States, where it was found that culturally relevant food is central to international students' sense of belonging (Stewin 2013; Wright et al. 2021). These studies have shown that access to culturally relevant foods can help them foster a sense of belonging in their new location (Mulrooney 2021).

On meeting students' needs, Garcia et al. (2019) define "servingness" in a higher education institution as the multidimensional and conceptual way of understanding a move from simply enrolling racially minoritized students to serving or meeting their needs. One of the indicators of "servingness" stated is the experiences that authenticate and positively influence the sense of belonging of these racially minoritized students. At Central Washington University, the Center for Diversity and Inclusion's mission is to proffer solutions to the needs of marginalized identity students (students from historically marginalized groups, including Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic people, low-income families, and first-generation college students) and create a feeling of belonging through comprehensive student support, workshops on social justice, and cultural and identity-based programs (CWU 2022). However, Central Washington University has not explored belonging through food. This thesis addresses this issue by researching the relationship between culturally relevant foods and international students' sense of belonging.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

As stated above, this research assesses the relationship between CWU international students' sense of belonging and culturally relevant food. **This work: 1) identifies and documents how international students perceive the role of culturally relevant food in their sense of belonging; 2) documents the availability and accessibility of culturally relevant food for international students on campus or lack thereof; and 3) proposes a tentative plan to propose to CWU food services, staff, and members of the higher administration.**

Study Significance

Rebecca Wheaton's seminal CERM thesis (2021) advanced the analysis of food insecurity on the CWU campus, opening the door to further analyzing food-related issues within CWU. This thesis builds on said work. To our knowledge, no analysis has addressed the relationship between culturally relevant food and a sense of belonging at CWU. This study will document and give an in-depth understanding of the topic in focus, enabling future replications to build on its findings. In addition, this study's findings will provide the Center for Diversity and Inclusion at CWU insight into a dimension of belonging that can be explored to achieve its mission. The findings of this different study will inform the school administration, enabling them to accommodate international students' food needs better, thereby improving their academic performance and mental well-being. This study can potentially increase international student enrollment, increasing the school's revenue. Finally, beyond Central Washington University, the findings of this research will serve as a baseline for replication in other universities and academic migrants.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Wright et al. (2021), foodways refer to the cultural, economic, and social practices relating to the production and consumption of food. This includes everything from how food is sourced and prepared to the rituals and traditions surrounding its consumption. Foodways are rooted in our cultural heritage and play a role in our daily lives. The food, how we eat it, and the occasions we celebrate with food reflect our cultural heritage. Various research (Fieldhouse 2013; Counihan & Van Esterik 2012; Mintz & Du Bois 2002; Fischler 1988) has shown that food is beyond sustenance but also an element of cultural identity. In that sense, food carries with it the stories, traditions, and values of a community such that when a meal is shared, a piece of culture and history is shared. Hence, food can create and strengthen bonds and foster a sense of unity, belonging, and connection among people.

Bronislaw Malinowski, considered the father of modern ethnographic fieldwork, believed that humans use culture to adapt. In his works, he argued that culture meets basic human needs like food, clothing, and shelter, facilitating an individual's ability to cope with environmental changes (Malinowski 1944). According to Malinowski, every aspect of a culture, from culinary practices and gastronomic traditions to clothing and housing, is not just a tradition but serves a specific adaptive purpose vital for survival and integration within a given environment.

This conceptualization of culture as an adaptive tool, if simplistic, is essential for understanding the experiences of international students, who often find themselves navigating a new cultural environment far from their native homes. Food, as a fundamental cultural element,

plays a significant role in the adaptation process to new social settings; for many students, the ability to access culturally relevant food becomes a matter of social and psychological satisfaction or sustenance and a crucial element in their overall sense of well-being and belonging in a foreign academic setting. The relevance of Malinowski's functionalist lens to this study lies in its application to how international students use their gastronomic traditions or native culinary practices to adapt to and integrate into their new environment at Central Washington University. This adaptation has practical implications for their sense of belonging, social interactions, emotional health, and academic performance.

Current research across different social fields highlights the critical role of belonging as a fundamental human need. Baumeister and Leary (1995), in their work, "The Need to Belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation," establish the necessity of social connections, demonstrating how the absence of social connections can lead to severe consequences such as social isolation. Abraham Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs also highlights the importance of belonging and its vital role in promoting psychological development and overall well-being. This research reveals that individuals who feel a sense of inclusion within a group are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviors and activities that will enhance community and individual well-being. Additionally, numerous studies (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Taylor 2020; Berkman 2000) have identified a strong correlation between loneliness and health risks such as depression, anxiety, and higher mortality rates.

Geetha et al. (2020) state that every culture has a separate way of relating to food. Their study on food, culture, and identity in multicultural societies suggests that cultural food practices are central to identity, and food practices are maintained through ethnic, cultural, or racial

backgrounds. Similarly, Stewin (2013) argues that familiar or cultural foods greatly influence international students' sense of belonging, comfort, identity maintenance, and emplacement. International students who maintain a familiar diet experience more food security than those who do not (Stewin 2013). According to Stewin (2013), the biggest hindrance to international students who prefer to eat familiar foods is that they cannot access foods that have a typical taste of what is obtained in their home countries. It was observed that consuming these familiar foods as nostalgic foods replaces their home travel, relieves them from homesickness and discomfort, and allows them to maintain their cultural, social, and religious identities. Stewin (2013) also noted that food revitalizes the identity of international students who live in a new environment when their sense of self is threatened; therefore, the accessibility and availability of culturally relevant foods are essential to maintaining international students' identity and food security. In line with Bronislaw Malinowski's perspective on culture as an adaptive tool, Fischler (1988) further elaborates on the vital role of food in expressing and shaping one's identity within a cultural framework. Fischler argues that food choices and dietary habits are integral to individual identity, serving as sustenance and a means of communication that conveys personal and cultural identities as a form of self-expression that is linked to an individual's perception of self in relation to others in society.

Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

Within the specific context of higher education, Karaman and Tarim (2018) found a correlation between students' university belonging and well-being. Their research showed that as belonging increased, the level of students' well-being also increased. Likewise, Pedler et al.

(2022) assert that feeling a sense of belonging boosts academic motivation, potentially leading to improved student achievement and retention. This body of evidence collectively establishes the fundamental nature of belonging as a vital element for individual health and societal function. Culturally relevant food serves as a connection to international students' home cultures, offering comfort and a sense of continuity in a foreign environment. Harrop and Hoppitt (2023) found that food preferences are deeply ingrained in and tied to cultural practices and festivities. They emphasize that access to culturally relevant foods can mitigate feelings of homesickness and alienation by fostering a connection to familiar traditions and practices. Adjusting to their new academic setting, international students encounter unique challenges such as weather & climate-induced mood fluctuation, homesickness, academic stress, and feelings of loneliness & isolation. Liz (2019) and Stewin (2013) find that the availability and accessibility of culturally relevant foods play a pivotal role in the adaptation process, helping mitigate homesickness and foster a smoother transition for international students.

In this context, it is easy to imagine how, for most students, particularly those coming from different cultural settings, belonging may play an important component of individual well-being that further emphasizes the significance of access to culturally relevant food on campus as a tool of adaptation. As international students navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a foreign academic environment, the utilization of their familiar gastronomic traditions, as Malinowski's theory highlighted, becomes a vital tool for their integration.

Drawing upon these, this study examines how culturally relevant food serves as a lens through which international students navigate and negotiate their cultural identities and sense of belonging within the university environment and its broader implications.

According to Mulrooney (2021), cultural food is a means through which students and staff can feel connected within a culturally diverse university. Participants in this study were excited to share their cultural recipes and stories. It allowed other people to learn about their culture, bringing to mind a sense of home and fostering a connection with the institution. Additionally, Wright et al. (2021) reveal that insufficient access to cultural foods for racially minoritized students can lead to cultural stress, negatively affecting their well-being and identity. Additionally, engagement in food-related activities such as cooking and sharing meals provides international students with opportunities to socialize and share their cultural heritage with others. Wright-Mair (2020) emphasized that such interactions are beyond food consumption but are acts of cultural exchange that enhance mutual understanding and respect among diverse student populations. These activities allow students to contribute to the multicultural setting of their host institutions and enhance international students' visibility and integration within the campus community.

Food, Belonging, and Migration

Food choices transcend preferences for taste. Our food choices encompass our cultural identities and societal norms. As explored by Cantarero et al. (2013), sociocultural factors and values influence the choices we make in food, and cultural identity plays a big role in what we eat and how we perceive certain foods. They argue that individuals often choose foods that hold symbolic ties to their cultural heritage to reaffirm their sense of belonging and identity. Kittler et al. (2012) further emphasized this connection between food choices and an individual's sense of identity, suggesting that an individual's daily food choices serve as a reaffirmation of their

cultural heritage. Customs and religious beliefs often shape dietary preferences within various cultural groups. Culture, comprising beliefs, values, and attitudes, is acquired through socialization and learning. Many associate foods from their culture and childhood with warmth, nostalgia, and cherished memories, integrating these culinary traditions into their identity. Consequently, foods from cultural backgrounds often serve as comfort foods during moments of distress or anxiety, connecting us to our familial roots and holding significant emotional value. Also, Sibal (2018) explores the communicative role of food, proposing that it conveys cultural meanings and helps negotiate them within new or diverse environments. This process is vital, as it enables individuals to maintain and reinforce their cultural connections and sense of identity, especially in difficult times.

As the rate of globalization and international education increases, individuals migrate across the globe, carrying their culinary traditions and cultural identities into new environments, which reshapes their social interactions and sense of self in significant ways.

A sense of belonging for migrants is a crucial aspect of their integration into new societies. According to Szaflarski et al. (2019), this sense of belonging-- which encompasses feelings of acceptance and connection-- directly influences their well-being and adaptation to new cultural and social environments. A deep sense of belonging can lead to improved mental health, an increase in confidence, and community engagement, whereas its absence can cause them to feel isolated and lonely, adversely affecting their mental health and well-being. Factors that hinder migrants' sense of belonging include prejudice, discrimination, language barriers, food, cultural differences, and limited social support networks. Conversely, the availability and

accessibility of support resources and the positive attitude of receiving communities can help foster a sense of belonging in migrants.

Bailey (2017) notes that migrants' sense of belonging is intrinsically connected to home-brought foods and the memories they generate. Cooking cultural foods is essential to their sense of belonging, helping them cope with the reality of migration, reminding migrants of their daily routines in their home country, and maintaining their food, eating practices, and material culture. Furthermore, Gerrity et al. (2021) demonstrate that access to culturally relevant food and ingredients can evoke trust and a feeling of connection to others, thereby enhancing the sense of belonging for people away from their home countries. Tourigny (2020) emphasizes how migrants often incorporate food they were used to before arriving in a region into their diets to foster a sense of belonging and create a sense of normality in their everyday lives.

Collectively, these studies show the important role that access to culturally relevant food plays in helping migrants and international students adjust emotionally and socially. Maintaining dietary customs not only helps preserve their cultural identity but also improves their ability to adapt and succeed in their new setting.

Homesickness and its Effects on Student Performance

Strayhorn (2019) described a sense of belonging in college as students perceived social support on campus, feelings of connectedness, and the experience of being cared for, accepted, respected, valued, and important within the campus community, including faculty, staff, and

peers. Researchers have found that a lower perceived sense of belonging at college predicted a higher likelihood of experiencing homesickness (Sun et al. 2016).

Homesickness is “a cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned with grieving for, yearning for, and being occupied with thoughts of home” (Fisher & Hood 1988, p. 426). It is “the distress or impairment caused by an actual or anticipated separation from home (Thurber and Walton 2012, p. 415). This stress, according to Fisher (2017), could range from mild to intense, impairing daily functions. According to Thurber and Walton (2012), transitioning to university is a crucial point in a student’s life, and for many students, this period is their first prolonged experience away from home. While pursuing a college degree and gaining independence from family can be exciting, Thurber and Walton point out that this transition can also lead to feelings of anxiety and isolation for some students and that students who feel homesick are three times more prone to leaving school than those who did not experience homesickness. Also, the stress that homesick students feel because of their homesickness is linked with low student retention in institutions of higher learning (Sun et al. 2016). The unsettling and stressful nature of homesickness has been linked to an elevated risk of poor health (Fisher 2017). Individuals experiencing homesickness commonly suffer from physical symptoms such as disrupted sleep and appetite, increased vulnerability to infections, and gastrointestinal issues (Fisher 2017; Van Tilburg, 1996). The stress associated with homesickness is related to heightened arousal, which can impact blood circulation and cause physical problems like headaches or dizziness (Fisher 2017). Studies on boarding school students have shown a positive correlation between homesickness and the frequency of non-traumatic ailments (Fisher 2017). Transitioning to college or university involves adjusting to new academic schedules, learning

styles, social environments, and overall demands (Strayhorn 2019). First-year students often feel a lack of control over managing homesickness and achieving a positive campus experience (Fisher 2017; Strayhorn 2019; Van Tilburg 1996). Situations defined by "high demand and low control" are associated with increased effort and stress, as well as elevated catecholamine and cortisol levels (Fisher 2017, p. 57). These hormonal changes can weaken the immune system, leading to an increased frequency of infections and illnesses. Therefore, physical ailments are a potential consequence of homesickness.

Homesickness can also present cognitive symptoms, such as persistent thoughts of longing for home and negative views of the new environment (Van Tilburg 1996). A cross-cultural study revealed that longing for home was prevalent among college students in the UK and the Netherlands (Stroebe et al. 2002). These persistent thoughts can detrimentally affect the college experience, especially in academic contexts (Fisher 2017). Researchers have investigated whether these pervasive thoughts impair cognitive functions, with mixed results. Some studies indicated that homesick students had diminished attentional abilities (Burt 1993) and higher scores on the Cognitive Failures Questionnaire (Fisher et al. 1985). However, Fisher and Hood (1987) found no significant differences in cognitive failure between homesick and non-homesick students. Despite these inconsistent findings, persistent negative thoughts about the new environment can complicate psychological health (Fisher & Hood 1988). Aaron Beck (1970), the pioneer of cognitive behavior therapy, suggested that an individual's beliefs, expectations, and assumptions greatly impact their well-being and behavior (Beck, 1970, p. 184). Consequently, enduring negative thoughts can influence a person's behavior and psychological functioning.

As noted earlier, cognitive symptoms of homesickness can evolve into serious mental health problems (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Individuals experiencing homesickness often exhibit emotional and psychological disturbances, including loneliness, depressive mood, and anxiety (Fisher, 2017; Van Tilburg, 1996). Foundational studies by Fisher and Hood (1987, 1988) and Fisher et al. (1985) demonstrated that university students who are homesick were more prone to anxiety and depression than their non-homesick peers. Furthermore, individuals who experienced recurrent homesickness from childhood into adulthood exhibited more depressive symptoms than the control group. This suggests a positive correlation between depression and homesickness. Research shows homesickness is a multifaceted phenomenon impacting physical, cognitive, and psychological functioning (Fisher, 2017). Studies have revealed connections between homesickness and depression, persistent longing for home, and physical ailments (Fisher, 2017; Stroebe et al., 2002).

Researchers discovered that international students in Malaysia exhibiting symptoms of homesickness and depression showed significant mental health improvements after undergoing seven sessions of cognitive behavior therapy (Saravanan et al., 2017). However, Saravanan et al. (2017) pointed out that counseling might not be accessible to all students due to limited availability or personal and cultural reasons. Saravanan et al. (2019) carried out a follow-up study on the coping mechanisms used by international students who were reported to be uninterested in counseling to gain a broader understanding of effective treatment methods. The authors suggested that this information could assist counselors and school administrators in developing effective interventions for homesick students.

Among the 520 international students in Malaysia diagnosed with homesickness and depression, nine successfully managed their condition using self-administered coping mechanisms. Semi-structured interviews with these students identified recurring themes, such as taking part in social and physical activities, practicing positive self-talk, and confiding in a trusted friend. Despite not receiving formal counseling, these students alleviated their homesickness symptoms by strengthening their social support systems. Similarly, a study of the experience of first-year students in higher education found that an initial lack of social support worsened homesickness. However, as students built a robust social support network, they started to experience a sense of belonging and adaptation. (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

Thurber's (2005) quantitative research, which examined the impact of a comprehensive homesickness prevention program on boys aged eight to sixteen attending a summer camp for the first time, provides additional evidence for the significance of support and belonging in reducing homesickness. Thurber's preventive measures included an introductory telephone call from a camp staff member before the boys' departure, intended to create a sense of connection. Thurber argued that these preventive measures would reduce homesickness, and results confirmed that campers who received the prevention package experienced milder homesickness compared to those who did not. This study highlighted the importance of social connections and a supportive environment in reducing homesickness.

In a two-phase study, Watt and Badger (2009) initially examined the link between homesickness and the need to belong. Then, they conducted an experimental investigation to establish a relationship between these factors. The participants were international students from 42 countries, aged 18 to 45, studying at five universities in Australia. Quantitative methods were

used to measure homesickness and the need to belong, with the number of reported friends reflecting the level of campus support. Although Watt and Badger discovered a positive correlation between homesickness and the need to belong, they were unable to confirm the substitution hypothesis, which posited that forming social connections in a new environment could replace those from home and reduce homesickness. It proposed that homesickness would decrease when social support was established (Watt & Badger, 2009). Sun et al. (2016) also found that geographic distance away from home also contributes to the intensity of homesickness. Their research found that students who were attending universities outside their home state were more likely to feel homesick than those who were not.

Metrics of Belonging: A Myriad of Implications

Extending beyond individual cultural identity, the sense of belonging in educational settings is important for academic and emotional well-being. According to Gray (2021), students' sense of belonging at school entails feeling accepted, respected, included, and supported in a learning environment. On why a student's sense of belonging is essential, Gray (2021) explains that students decide to be in environments where they feel comfortable. Students who do not feel a sense of belonging in their learning environment find it difficult to dedicate their cognitive resources to their academic duties and often encounter emotional stress. The adverse effects of not feeling a sense of belonging can lead students to have a negative image of their identity or their place within the learning environment, which might lead them to do things they would not ordinarily do, such as truancy (Gray 2021).

A variety of factors affect students' sense of belonging. They include school safety & security, Student engagement, social support, a celebration of diversity, student identity, school weather & climate, and academic achievement. According to Young et al. (2004), the perception of how safe they are in their school can affect their sense of belonging. When students have a sense of safety and security in their learning environment, they tend to have an increased sense of comfort and inclusion, thereby contributing to their sense of belonging. Also, when students actively engage in their learning activities, they are more likely to feel connected to their school.

Social support is another important element, as Martinot et al. (2022) argue that social support plays a vital role in students' sense of belonging. They argue that students who have cordial relationships with their peers and teachers feel increased support, which can foster a sense of belonging. Similarly, a study was conducted to comprehend better the concept of student belonging among college students. The findings of this study suggest that how the students perceived the institution's commitment to diversity affected their sense of belonging (Ingram 2012). Likewise, Gao et al. (2021) carried out a study on racially minoritized students in a Hong Kong university to find out how they understand and define belonging. The study results suggest that the perception of how supportive the campus is to their ethnic and racial differences and the nature of the interaction between their peers and staff significantly influenced the ethnically minoritized students' sense of belonging and identification with the institution.

Regarding student identity as a factor affecting student belonging, Gray (2021) explains that students from minority racial and ethnic groups feel a sense of disconnect from their learning environment, likely caused by a lack of representation. Also, climate- and weather-

induced mood swings can be discomfoting, causing students to feel sad and lonely, resulting in their withdrawal from school activities (Schwab et al. 2018). According to Young et al. (2004), academic achievement affects students' self-esteem, resulting in a sense of belonging. In conclusion, the factors affecting student belonging are multidimensional. Thus, understanding and addressing them can produce an inclusive and conducive environment that fosters student academic success and well-being.

This is corroborated by studies like those of Freeman et al. (2007) and Abdollahi et al. (2020), which link a strong sense of belonging to improved academic motivation and reduced stress. They argue that a sense of belonging in students can lower drop-out rates, improve academic performance, mental health, and social involvement, and increase emotional well-being and motivation for academic success. For example, a study on 8th to 12th graders from six schools suggests that students' low sense of belonging in school leads to academic stress, resulting in low academic performance. This study measured school belonging using metrics like connection to teachers, support, and professional help. The result shows that those with a high sense of belonging had a high ability to endure difficult conditions and hence showed lower levels of academic stress (Abdollahi et al. 2020). In the same vein, research conducted to examine the relationship between feelings of belonging in class and academic motivation in first-year college students shows a relationship between their sense of belonging and academic motivation (Freeman et al. 2007). The metrics used to measure belonging include perceived instructor characteristics, student engagement, and academic self-efficacy. According to Hausmann et al. (2009), a sense of belonging plays a role in student persistence. Enhancing the sense of belonging of racially minoritized students requires interventions targeted at their racial

needs or concerns. Goodenow (1993) developed a tool to measure how adolescents feel about their belongingness to their school environment and the findings revealed that students' sense of belonging in their school environment can influence how well the student does in school. Arslan (2021) builds on the established link between school belonging and academic motivation (Goodenow and Grady 1993) by exploring the influence of school belonging on student well-being. This research emphasized the concept of school belongingness, including social inclusion and exclusion, and identified loneliness as a mediator between these experiences and students' mental health. This finding further supports the importance of fostering students' sense of belonging in the school environment. By promoting social inclusion and reducing exclusion, schools can potentially alleviate loneliness, thereby fostering a healthier school environment that benefits students' mental health and, consequently, their academic motivation (Goodenow and Grady 1993).

In conclusion, cultural food security influences racial minority college students' ability to perform foodways (i.e., the social and cultural practices surrounding food), which connects them to their cultural identities. Hence, the unavailability of foodways causes depression and anxiety, increasing their feelings of identity degradation. Practicing their foodways enhances their well-being, increases happiness, comfort, and a sense of belonging, and reduces stress (Wright et al. 2021).

Food Insecurity and Academic Success

Food insecurity refers to the "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable

ways” (United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2014b).

International students are more likely to experience food insecurity due to distance from home, unavailability of resources and familiar or culturally relevant food on campus, and limited income (Hanbazza et al. 2021). According to Debate et al. (2021), food-insecure students are at a higher risk of experiencing challenges with careers and academics. They are also more likely to experience psychological distress, loneliness, and suicidal behavior and are less likely to be resilient. Food insecurity and the absence of culturally relevant foods can exacerbate each other, constitute the same process, or run in different tracks. While documenting in detail these (co)relations expands beyond the scope of this study, it is important for this analysis to acknowledge food insecurity as a fundamental dimension of belonging, access to culturally relevant food, and student performance (see Wheaton, 2021 for more detail on this issue).

A study by Wright et al. (2021) on the influence of cultural food security on cultural identity involving international students in the United States shows that international students who lacked access to their cultural food nursed thoughts of returning to their home countries. Wright et al. (2021) also suggest that cultural foods facilitate the ethnic & cultural maintenance, expression, connection, and well-being of international students. They suggest that universities reduce international students’ food insecurity by diminishing cultural food impediments. Skinner (2019) states that international students need their hardiness and a well-structured support system to navigate culture shock, social integration, coursework, and other responsibilities. Hence, the exceptional support of their institutions is required to enjoy a productive study experience in the United States.

Finally, Institutions of education can foster international students' feelings of belonging and cultural integration by promoting food-related events and integrating a variety of cuisines into their campus dining options. Harrop and Hoppitt (2023) recommend that universities organize activities like international food festivals and cooking workshops to foster cultural exchange and community engagement. These efforts will enhance the campus experience and foster inclusiveness and cross-cultural understanding.

CHAPTER III

STUDY AREA

Geography

Central Washington University is in Ellensburg, Washington, in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Ellensburg is a small town with a population estimate of 19,596 (US Census Bureau 2021), lying 172 kilometers (about 107 mi) east of Seattle, the largest city in Washington, 45 kilometers (about 28 mi) north of Yakima, the 11th largest city in Washington, 113 kilometers (about 70 mi) south of Wenatchee the second largest city in central Washington and, 278 kilometers (about 173 mi) south of Spokane, the second largest city in Washington. Ellensburg has a semi-arid climate experiences annual average high and low temperatures of 60°F and 36°F, respectively. The average annual precipitation is 8.9 inches, and the average annual snowfall is 22 inches (US Climate Date 2023). The summer is dry with low humidity and precipitation, and the temperatures range between 65°F and 85°F, with temperatures reaching mid-90°s and occasional heat waves. During the winter, the temperature ranges between 35°F and 45°F, with occasional cold waves bringing it below freezing point. Snow and rain are the common forms of precipitation in the winter months. January is the coldest month. In the fall and spring months, Ellensburg experiences high winds that can cause it to feel colder than the actual temperature. These climate conditions can be drastically different from those in the place of origin of many international students—a constant reminder of being in a faraway place, which can exacerbate nostalgia.

Population of International Students

International students at Central Washington University come from no fewer than 66 countries of the world, with Japan, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia making up the largest international communities on campus. The population of international students was 337 in 2019, 201 in 2020, 189 in 2021, 269 in 2022, and 174 in fall 2023 (Shelby King, personal communication; Feb. 2023; June 2024), making up about 3% of the total students (College Factual). International graduate students in the Ellensburg campus were 18 in 2019, 16 in 2020, 8 in 2021, and 18 in 2022 (Shelby King, personal communication; Feb. 2023).

On-Campus Housing, Dining and Food Services

The Housing and Residence Life at Central Washington University offers on-campus housing to over 4000 students. On-campus housing consists of 16 residence halls (Wendell Hill A & B, Quigley, Hitchcock, Davies, Meisner, Sparks, Beck, Stephens Whitney, Moore, North, Wilson, Dugmore, Sue Lombard, Kamola, and Barto) and several studios, one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments in Anderson, Short Getz, Wahle, Brooklane Village and Student Village apartments. On-campus housing is mandatory for first-year students. International students on the Ellensburg campus, especially graduate students, mostly live in the residence halls on campus.

Central Washington University, Ellensburg, has several on-campus dining facilities, including markets, restaurants, and cafes (Figure 1). These facilities offer food options ranging from stir-fries, sandwiches, pizzas, and salads, as well as Asian specialties like Choi-mien. The

coffee shops and snack bars across campus offer a range of tea, coffee, and pastries. These facilities consist of restaurant-style dining halls like Panda Express, located in the North Commons, and Holmes Dining, located in the Student Union & Recreation Center (SURC). In general, the dining and food services at Central Washington University are designed to provide Students, faculty, and staff with full meal and snack options. Students living in the residence halls are mandated to enroll in a meal plan and can shop across these dining facilities with their connection cards.

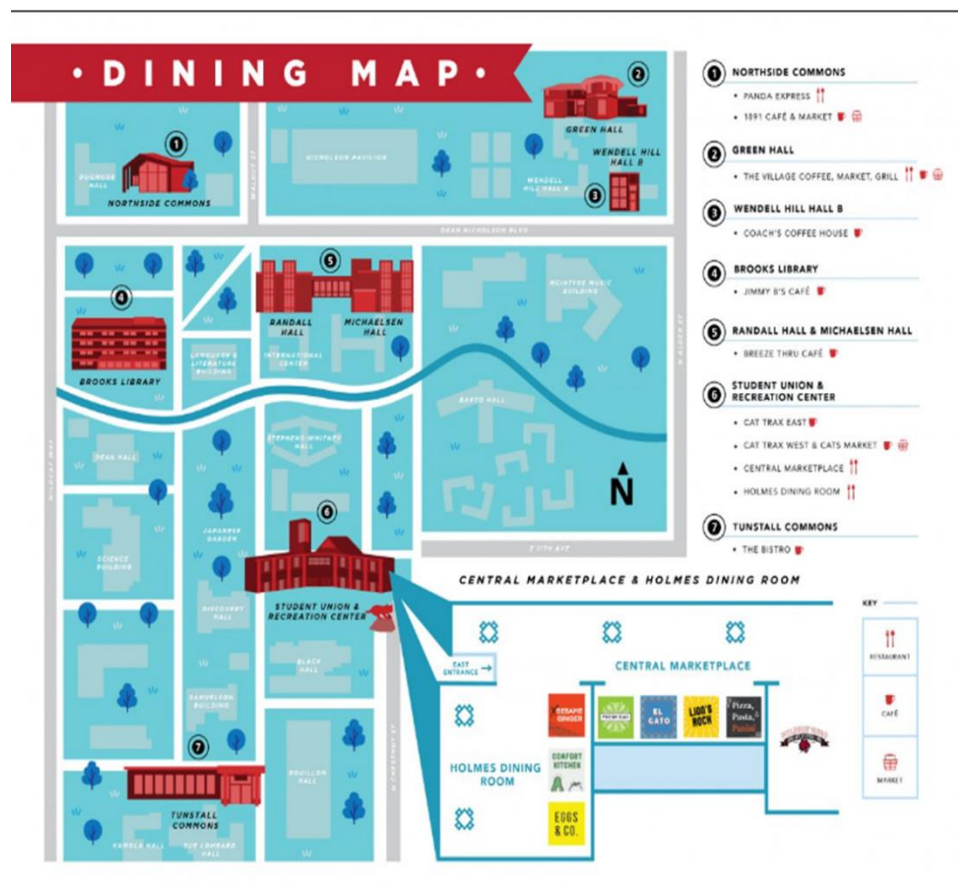


Figure 1: On-campus dining map (CWU dining services website)

SURC and Food

The building is in the center of campus, which gives easy access to residence halls and academic buildings. It is a multi-purpose facility that serves both the recreational and social needs of students and members of the CWU community. It has a ballroom, a theater, various meeting and conference rooms, and lounges for students to relax, eat and socialize. In terms of food offerings, the SURC includes the residential dining hall (Holmes dining), espresso and smoothie bars, and convenience stores that give students access to different culinary options.

The Recreation center part of this building offers a range of athletic facilities and programs, a radio station, student services, and programming offices. For students, especially those who live on campus, this space is intended to be a home away from home. In different ways, the SURC aims to be a place of leisure and social integration for students, perhaps fostering a sense of belonging and connection to the broader CWU community. Here, students come to connect and engage with each other. The space is designed to generate a sense of community, which is evident in its design and the diverse range of activities and services offered. Each aspect of this space was arranged to encourage interaction and collaboration, making it an important part of the student experience.

In this context, it is often common to walk through the SURC at any time of the day to see groups of students hanging out around the tables on the first and second floors. Whether they are collaborating on projects, sharing meals, or simply enjoying a break between classes, the atmosphere is always alive and inviting. The layout of the tables, strategically placed to enhance interaction and visibility, encourages students to meet and mingle, fostering an environment where friendships are formed and ideas are exchanged. This setting promotes academic

teamwork and strengthens and sustains the social network of the CWU community, establishing it as a meeting spot for students of diverse backgrounds.

CHAPTER IV

CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

Methodology

In assessing the relationship between culturally relevant food and international students' sense of belonging at CWU, this research design was divided into two stages. The first stage was exploratory, and the second stage was devoted to information analysis (Bernard 2017). For the first stage of this study, I: (1) carried out a comprehensive literature review of relevant materials, including thesis, dissertations, and academic journals; (2) defined research methodologies and study design; and 3) worked toward Human Subjects Conduct of Research's IRB study approval process; finally, 4) I recruited research subjects using purposive sampling and snowballing. For the second stage, I 1) carried out in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews and data analysis, 2) reviewed the information materializing across all sources, and 3) made recommendations to CWU dining services, staff, and higher administration based on the results. This report is presented as a master's thesis.

Participant Recruitment

This research explores how culturally relevant food affects the sense of belonging of international students at Central Washington University (CWU). The subject population is international students studying at CWU Ellensburg campus. After securing approval from the Human Subjects Review Council to conduct research on human populations, I initiated contact with international students. To ensure that the participants in the study can provide the most relevant and insightful information, I utilized purposive sampling, which involves deliberately

selecting individuals who possess the specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research question. This approach, as Bernard (2017) highlighted, enabled me to obtain detailed information about this topic being investigated from individuals with relevant knowledge or experience. To identify potential study participants, I leveraged my existing network of international students at CWU. I reached out to them to explain the purpose and significance of the research and invited them to participate in the study voluntarily. The recruitment strategy for this study involved the use of the snowball sampling method. After leveraging my existing network of international students, I requested that they refer anyone who meets the subject population criteria and is interested in participating in the study. This approach enabled me to extend the reach of the study beyond my immediate network. Once I was referred to a potential participant, I introduced myself and provided a detailed explanation of the research objectives and procedures. I reiterated that participation is voluntary and they are free to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any point. I also discussed any potential risks involved and answered any questions they had. If the individual agreed to participate in the study, I scheduled an interview at a mutually agreed-upon time that is convenient for them.

Respecting and maintaining the privacy of participants during the recruitment process was a crucial ethical consideration in this research. To ensure that the privacy of participants was protected, I did not collect any identifiable information during the interview process. This meant that I did not ask for personal information that may reveal their identity, such as their name, contact information, or any other details that may compromise their privacy. Instead, I maintained anonymity by using identification numbers or pseudonyms to refer to participants during the interview process. Additionally, I stored all information collected during the

recruitment process in a secure and confidential manner, and access to the information was restricted to only me.

Minimizing potential undue influence to participate in a study is essential to ensure that participants make an informed decision based on their own free will. To achieve this, I took several steps during the recruitment process. First, I let potential participants know that participation is voluntary and that they are not obligated to participate in the study. I told them that their decision to refuse participation or withdraw from the study would not have negative consequences on their status at CWU or any services provided to them. Furthermore, I provided them with all the necessary information regarding the research, including the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. This enabled them to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the study. Also, I made sure that participants had ample time to consider their decision and ask any questions they had. I also avoided coercive language or tactics that may pressure them to participate. By following these measures, I ensured that undue influence to participate was minimized and that the participants made an informed decision based on their own free will.

Since this interview is focused on food and personal experiences, there is little to no likelihood of harm occurring. However, discussing inaccessible cultural food elicited feelings of nostalgia or homesickness in some participants, leading to temporary discomfort or pauses in the interview. This resulted in a slightly longer interview time, but it did not have any larger or more serious effects on the participant. Overall, the harm or discomfort associated with this study was minimal, and any negative effects were temporary and easily manageable. To effectively minimize potential discomforts that may arise, I was attentive to the participant's body language

and reactions during the interviews. I took measures to avoid triggering any negative emotions or feelings. Also, I reminded them regularly that they were not obliged to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable or uneasy. This approach enabled me to provide a safe and supportive environment for participants to engage in the study while minimizing harm or discomfort.

Data Collection

The objectives this study aims to achieve are categorized in Bernard's (2017) data domain list as internal states (data including attitudes, beliefs, values, and perceptions).

Research Objectives:

1) to identify and document how international students perceive the role of culturally relevant food in their sense of belonging.

2) to document the availability and accessibility of culturally relevant food for international students on campus, or lack thereof.

3) to propose a tentative plan to propose to CWU food services, staff, and members of the higher administration.

Accordingly, all data was collected via 13 semi-structured interviews with the research participants, starting from early summer 2023 through the spring quarter of 2024. These interviews comprise descriptive, contrast, and structural open-ended questions to identify and document emerging themes. The interviews were recorded using a recording device. All interviews were recorded after verbal consent had been obtained and transcribed afterward using manual transcription. The interviews ranged between 30 minutes and 60 minutes.

Interview questions focused on documenting research objectives:

Objective 1: To identify and document how international students perceive the role of culturally relevant food in their sense of belonging. Interviews included questions such as: What is your food experience on campus? What does belonging mean to you? Do you have access to your cultural food on campus? If not, describe how you would feel if you had access to your cultural food on campus (Mulrooney 2021; Stewin 2013). Understanding their perception formed the basis of identifying the foods that could help them foster a sense of belonging. The purpose was to map restaurants and grocery stores where international or cultural foods can be accessed on campus and in Ellensburg and use it as a visual aid for the interviews. This map would help participants, in turn, to identify places where they access familiar food while describing their food experience at CWU. To identify and document what culturally relevant food can help students foster a sense of belonging, I asked the research participants to mention those cultural foods they consider as important to their sense of belonging to their own traditions and/or cultural practices. The identification of these foods formed the basis for understanding how they are impacted by the absence or presence of them around campus.

Objective 2: To document the availability and accessibility of culturally relevant food for international students on campus, or lack thereof, I used Spradley's (1979) descriptive-style questions as a guide to create hypothetical scenarios and elicit their emotions and responses. Additionally, I transcribed the interviews with international students to identify the culturally relevant foods to look for. Then, I visited the places on campus where food is served to confirm whether these culturally relevant foods are available and accessible on campus.

Objective 3: To achieve this objective, I transcribed and coded all interviews to identify emerging themes and patterns and perform thematic analysis (Spradley 1979; Bernard 2017). This enabled me to identify the presence or absence of culturally relevant food is absent. The results will inform a recommendation of a culturally relevant food management plan to be proposed to CWU dining services, staff, and higher administration.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in separate phases. First, I removed identifiers to protect the identities of the research participants. Then, I transcribed the recordings and coded them. During transcription, I performed a preliminary thematic analysis based on Bernard (2017) to achieve the objective of identifying and documenting perceptions, availability, and access to cultural food on campus. Data was coded for themes using ethnographic insights, as Bernard (2017) suggests, to establish the relationship between international students' sense of belonging and culturally relevant food. After key themes were identified, I aggregated them into clusters. The findings were used to write an ethnography. Overall, this analysis took place between the fall quarter of 2023 and the Spring quarter of 2024.

Research Limitation and Consideration

The first limitation I encountered while carrying out this study was linguistics in nature. Understandably, some international students I established relationships with do not have a fluent

command of English. This affected the time range and quality of some interviews. To tackle this, I employed Google Translate or similar translating apps during interviews to help clarify interviews. Similarly, during transcription, I encountered a few more linguistic challenges, mostly related to the various accents of my research participants; however, I tackled this by playing the recordings repeatedly and paying attention while conducting the interviews.

As an international student, I was aware of my positionality, so I therefore went to great lengths to limit (to the extent possible) the role that my own experiences would introduce bias in my study. To achieve this, I tried not to complete my participants' sentences before they finished talking, allowing them to share their experiences; similarly, I allowed the interview data to inform my writing.

Aside from the linguistic considerations, several practical considerations limit my study's reach. As a master's thesis, the time allocated to conducting this research barely addressed many of the issues related to food on campus. Much remains to be documented and analyzed. In terms of methodologies, a large survey complementing this thesis' interviews could reach a broader audience.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

Food, Diversity, And Representation

International students who participated in this study came from different parts of the world, primarily countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, to Central Washington University's Ellensburg campus. For most of them, coming to CWU to study was their first international trip and their first time away from their families and native homes for an extended period. Hence, it was their first time trying food from other cultures or being in a different educational system. Among them were undergraduate and graduate students. The graduate students among them had their undergraduate studies in their home countries. They shared their food experiences on campus and described culturally relevant food as foods that connect them to their culture. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked how important it was for them to maintain a connection to their cultural identity and how food plays a role in that connection. All participants' responses suggested that maintaining their cultural identity was not just important but crucial to their overall well-being. Participant D particularly said that their cultural identity cannot be separated from who they are; hence, maintaining their identity is synonymous with maintaining who they are. During the interviews, the participants sharing their food experiences on campus evoked various emotions, including nostalgia, disappointment, and sadness. All participants shared what it has been like for them on campus in terms of food, and through their responses, it was established that international students are eager to have access to foods relevant to their cultures on campus. As people whose identity is rooted in culture and is

expressed through the foods that they eat, it is challenging to navigate a new environment without foods that help them maintain their identity. To them, international students being in a new physical and educational environment is already challenging as it is; however, also having to deal with hunger and food insecurity stemming from their inability to access culturally relevant food and foods that are meaningful to them adds an extra layer to the difficulty they experience in their transition.

Similar to my own experience, when Participant A walked into Holmes dining, a dining hall where various food options are served at the Student Union and Recreation Center (SURC) building, the atmosphere was alive with fellow students chattering and the aroma of various cuisines filling the air. It was on the evening following their arrival on campus; they entered the dining hall with a mixture of anticipation and fatigue as they had been on a two-day journey from their home country to the Ellensburg campus of Central Washington University. Long queues formed before each section of the serving area for hungry and eager students wound their way through the dining hall as they waited their turn to be served. The menu for the different sections in the dining hall was on a screen above where they could read the options contained in the menu. They perused the menu with the hope that they would find something that resonated with their taste or flavors of home. Their initial hope faded when, after investigating the options available, they found that despite the diverse options, none seemed to evoke a sense of familiarity. Disappointed and yearning for a taste of familiarity, participant A left the dining hall, their spirit dampened by their inability to find comfort through food in their new environment. This was particularly a painful experience as they felt disconnected and unwelcome in this new environment that would be their home for a couple of years as they went through college.

In the same vein, after arriving on campus and subsequently settling into their assigned room in the on-campus residence hall, participant B was full of excitement to learn about a restaurant on campus that catered to their ethnic cuisine. Living in the on-campus residence hall meant that they had a meal plan that allowed them to purchase food and drinks from the on-campus dining hall, restaurants, and coffee shops with their connection card. Eager and excited to savor the flavors of their cultural heritage, they made their way to this restaurant. Upon entering, participant B placed their order and settled into the waiting area, where they engaged in conversation with fellow students from the same region of the world in their local language. As they shared stories and experiences about food from their cultures, participant B grew even more excited as they looked forward to their meal. Finally, their order arrived, and with all the built-up anticipation, they took their first bite, only to be met with disappointment as the taste fell short of their expectations. The difference between the anticipated and the actual flavors and taste left Participant B feeling sad, describing the experience as nothing short of heartbreaking. The anticipation of enjoying a taste of familiarity, coupled with the realization that the dish did not meet their expectations, evoked a negative feeling over what was supposed to be a pleasant culinary experience, evoking memories of home.

These experiences are like those of other international students who participated in this study. One thing that stood out among them was that they were all unable to find foods that connected them to their culture or were meaningful to their culture on campus. These international students come from across the world, leaving family and familiar ways behind. To them, food meant more than eating; it was a way to make their new environment a home. Sharing more on their experiences, participants confirm that the variety of cuisines available on

campus does not reflect the diverse backgrounds of the student population. Many of them whose ethnicity is mentioned in certain food options served in the on-campus dining hall and restaurant say that food does not reflect their diversity in any way that is meaningful to them.

Some of the international students who shared their experiences say that they are excited to explore new food on campus as a means of cultural exchange. However, they would love to have access to their cultural food to keep them grounded. For them, access to culturally relevant food goes beyond having familiar food on campus. It communicates that their presence on campus is acknowledged by the school administration and that this acknowledgment is reflected by the options of food made available on campus. To them, it signifies that they have a space here on campus and that they belong and are an important part of the campus community.

Being a part of and feeling seen in the campus community is something they were passionate about. The vignettes below show some of the responses to the question of how they would feel if they had access to their cultural food on campus;

It would go a long way in making me feel like I belong here, like there are more spaces I can get to. Spaces I can fit in and connect to. It will make me feel seen and that my presence is acknowledged. Also, it would make me feel that the campus is trying to make me comfortable. The absence of my cultural food on campus feels like nobody knows that I am here (Participant A).

Similarly, another Research participant stated: “[Had I my food], I would feel so happy and maybe visit the dining halls frequently. I would feel comfortable being on campus.” (Participant B). As Participant A expressed, access to their cultural cuisine would not only make them feel seen and acknowledged but would significantly contribute to their sense of belonging

and integration into campus life. All participants mentioned different ways to feel they belong on campus but described culturally relevant food as crucial to their sense of self, well-being, and, consequently, their academic success. The provision of culturally relevant food at on-campus dining halls and restaurants is a simple yet profound gesture that can have a great impact on the well-being and academic success of international students.

These international students' food experiences raise concerns about diversity in food options and cultural representation on the CWU Ellensburg campus, calling attention to a critical aspect of campus life that is often overlooked: the importance of food in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural connection. Food is not only about sustenance but also a powerful link to one's roots, identity, and sense of home (Stewin 2013), especially for those navigating a new environment far from their accustomed gastronomic environments. The absence of culturally relevant food options not only deprives international students of a taste of home but also communicates a message of exclusion and neglect. Participants described feeling alienated by the school administration in food decisions made on campus due to not having food from their culture.

When asked to describe when they felt a strong sense of belonging on campus and how food contributed, some participants shared about the day Holmes Dining served a cultural food on the menu. A certain region of the world is known for this food, and some of the participants heard about it being on the menu from peers who had gone to the dining hall that evening. Participant C recalled their eyes lighting up with excitement when they were told about this food being on the menu by an acquaintance as they entered the Student Union and Recreation Center after a long day at school. They joined the queue with other students who chatted excitedly,

anticipating the food. After getting served, they joined a table, and various conversations were held about the food's taste and mode of preparation. This food sparked conversations among acquaintances and strangers, and new connections were forged. It was the first time they had their culturally relevant food on campus since their arrival, and even though it did not taste exactly like what they knew, they felt a sense of pride in having it on the menu. For the first time, they could share their culture with their friends through food, and more than sharing this part of their identity with their friends, they felt seen. While this scenario was the first and the last time they found their cultural food on the menu, the experience left a lasting impression on them as they often referred to it and wished it could happen again. In other words, the one time they felt seen on campus made a huge impact on their sense of belonging on campus.

Similarly, another participant narrated how happy and proud they felt attending a cultural event on campus where their culturally relevant food and music were played. They described a Saturday evening where students converged at the SURC ballroom to share a cultural experience. From the talks to the dance and other cultural displays, they felt a sense of connection to the campus community. They explained having gone to the event with some friends who were domestic students and how answering their questions arising from what they saw displayed about their culture made them feel proud. This was a particularly big deal for them because story-sharing was a huge part of their culture, and having the opportunity to share these stories gave them a sense of home. After this event, they were motivated to attend campus events. However, their willingness to participate was cut short by their inability to find other events that made them feel a sense of belonging.

Following the participants' assertions that they did not have access to their culturally relevant food on campus, which they believed would make them feel like they belonged on campus, I asked them to mention culturally relevant food that would help foster a sense of belonging in them if they were available on campus. The different participants mentioned numerous food options, which I documented, and I took time to visit dining halls and restaurants on campus to confirm whether these food options were truly not available on campus. I ensured to visit on each day of the week to investigate the menu options on these days. After my numerous visits to these on-campus dining halls and restaurants and casual conversations with the staff I meet at each visit, I found that truly none of the food these international students that participated in this study mentioned is part of the food options on the menu. This confirmed that truly culturally relevant food options, which participants of this study believed would help foster a sense of belonging in them if available on campus, were lacking.

From the foregoing, it has been established that international students do not have access to culturally relevant food on campus. This begs the question: Are the food decisions on campus representative of its population? Is every category of the student population on campus represented in the dining decisions? Is the diversity in the student population reflected in the food options on campus?

Social Implications of a Lack of Culturally Relevant Foods on Campus

Building on the perspective that there are social dimensions to food, the absence of culturally relevant food on campus has serious social implications for international students, one

of which is exclusion from social realities. The Student Union and Recreation (SURC) building, which houses various food points and a dining hall, Panda Express (“Asian”-inspired food), and the Bistro are social realities where students meet and forge connections beyond the classroom. Beyond being a place where students come to purchase food and snacks, it is a place where they hang out with friends or rest between classes or at the end of the day. In that sense, students can meet their peers and other members of the university community and build relationships through shared values or common interests within this social context and reality. However, the unavailability of culturally relevant foods in these places makes international students unable to be players in this reality. International students’ inability to participate in these social realities on campus contributes to their sense of exclusion and alienation, making them feel like they are missing out on connections. Participant E said, “There are people I could have met and meaningful connections and cultural exchanges that would have been beneficial to my life that I could have made, which will never happen for me because I do not use the dining halls or the SURC.”

Participant C described a time they felt excluded from social reality; it was a dull evening after their last class for the day. A couple of their classmates who were not international students were on their way to the dining hall to have dinner with their friends, and they had been urged to join. While they were excited at the idea of joining a group of friends to have dinner and the prospect of making new connections, they could not join their classmates at the dining hall because they were hungry and needed to go home to eat as the foods offered at the dining their classmates were going to were not familiar to them. Another participant who has also experienced the issue of being excluded from a social reality suggested that having cultural food

on campus may not be a regular option on the menu; however, having it occasionally or at events will boost their sense of belonging and positively influence their participation at on-campus events.

After establishing the fact that international students lack culturally relevant food on campus, participants were asked if they felt that the lack of culturally relevant food options on campus affected their willingness to participate in campus events and activities, and they all answered yes. Some of the participants shared their thoughts on how it affected their willingness to participate in campus activities and events. Participant A said that one of the motivations for them to attend events or activities after academic work is the possibility of eating food at the event venue. In other words, having food that they are excited to have would be a motivation for them to attend these events. However, because there is no possibility of international students finding culturally relevant foods at the event venue, they are less willing to attend campus activities and events. For them, having culturally relevant food would be a driving force in making the events more attractive to them and something they can sacrifice their time for as they often have busy schedules. Ultimately, they miss out on events and activities that could have been opportunities to connect.

On-campus events, as avenues for socialization and community building, are a place for students to mingle and build a sense of community. In these spaces, students have the chance to meet their peers from various majors, staff, and faculty members whom they might not encounter otherwise. The relaxed atmosphere of these social gatherings is often responsible for sparking connections based on shared interests and values. These events provide an opportunity for students to expand their social circles and establish meaningful relationships. Students can

discover common ground and develop friendships that extend beyond the event by engaging in conversations and activities. Beyond the social benefits, they provide students with opportunities for personal growth and enrichment, exposing them to new ideas and perspectives.

Participation in these activities complements formal education, helping students develop skills and leadership qualities that will serve them well beyond the campus community. Students' campus experience is enhanced greatly through these events and activities. While the advantages of on-campus events for socialization and community building are undeniable, it is important to acknowledge that not all students can enjoy these benefits equally. Specifically, international students who may be hesitant to join these events due to the absence of culturally relevant food are at risk of being excluded from this aspect of campus life. By not paying attention to the dietary preferences and gastronomic traditions of international students, CWU makes them feel left out and disconnected from the campus community. Without access to familiar foods, international students who participated in this study found it difficult to fully engage in the on-campus activities, missing out on valuable opportunities to connect with their peers and become fully immersed in the campus community. However, by incorporating international students' culturally relevant food options into on-campus events, CWU can take meaningful steps toward creating an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and respected.

By recognizing and accommodating the dietary needs of international students, the school administration demonstrates a commitment to diversity and equity, thereby showcasing to these international students that their cultural backgrounds are not only accepted but celebrated. Additionally, the benefits of providing culturally relevant foods extend beyond sustenance. Exposure to diverse cuisines can serve as a driver for cross-cultural exchange and dialogue

among students from different backgrounds. By sharing meals and experiencing new flavors together, students can learn about and appreciate each other's cultures, breaking down barriers and fostering unity. In that sense, embracing and celebrating diversity on campus through food can bridge gaps, promote inclusivity, and cultivate a more vibrant and interconnected campus environment, shaping the social dynamics of the campus community in favor of all its members, regardless of their national origin.

Food and International Students' Academic Performance

Various factors influence students' academic performance, with mental and physical health being key among them (Abdollahi et al. 2020; Freeman et al. 2007). In this study, I examined the experiences of international students who faced challenges related to accessing culturally relevant foods on campus and dealing with homesickness, shedding light on how these issues affect their academic performance. The inability to access familiar cultural foods is a cause for concern, often leading to feelings of food insecurity among international students. This sense of insecurity arising from a lack of access to familiar flavors also intensifies feelings of loneliness and homesickness (Stewin 2013). As noted by Debate et al. (2021), there is a link between food insecurity and heightened psychological distress, exacerbating feelings of homesickness among international students.

Additionally, culturally relevant foods hold profound emotional significance. For many individuals, these foods evoke nostalgia, comfort, and warmth, serving as a source of solace during difficult times. As Kittler et al. (2012) noted, consuming culturally familiar foods is often

associated with a sense of home and belonging, providing relief from the challenges of adjusting to a new environment.

However, for international students who are unable to access their cultural foods, easing homesickness becomes increasingly difficult. Without these culinary comforts, international students may struggle to cope with feelings of displacement and isolation, exacerbating their psychological distress. This heightened distress manifests in various ways that directly impact academic performance. Difficulty concentrating in class and in their academic work due to persistent homesickness and emotional instability significantly hinders international students' ability to engage effectively with their studies. Consequently, this lack of focus and academic engagement results in reduced performance in the classroom, hindering students' overall academic success.

During Participant E's first quarter on campus, at this time they were yet to adjust fully to the campus environment; they noted that they spent their days in class thinking of what to eat, and also due to their inability to find familiar foods to eat, they frequently starved and hunger pangs would destabilize them and make it difficult to concentrate during lectures. These series of incidents negatively impacted their grades greatly because they barely understood what was being taught in class, and due to the workload load, it was more difficult to go back to study everything afresh. They described several instances when they were so weak from hunger that they would sleep off in class during lectures. Studying at home was also difficult because they had to come up with something to cook. They had struggled so much with food that they lost interest in school and wanted to go home.

Similarly, Participant D describes that their friend inviting them to share a meal relevant to their culture made a huge difference in their mental health and, consequently, their exam grade. This set them up for great success in their academic work, as they were struggling with homesickness at the time. Eating food from their culture enabled them to relive memories of home and relieved their homesickness. This emotional support they received from their cultural food not only alleviated feelings of isolation but also provided a sense of belonging and connection, which is vital for overall well-being and academic success. Furthermore, research has shown that diet plays a significant role in cognitive function and academic performance. A balanced diet, which includes culturally relevant and familiar foods, provides essential nutrients that support brain health and optimizes cognitive and emotional functions (Gomez-Pinilla 2008). When students have access to foods that are meaningful to them culturally, they are food secure (Wright et al. 2021), and they are more likely to maintain healthy eating habits, which results in improved concentration, memory, and overall academic performance.

Another participant described how they were no longer able to share meals with friends and acquaintances as they used to back home, which fostered a sense of community in their culture. Their inability to continue these practices has caused them a great deal of sadness and incompleteness.

Coping With Homesickness: Two Approaches – Focus or Disorientation

Participants of this study were asked if they feel homesick, the things that make them feel homesick and the ways in which they manage and cope with the feeling of homesickness. They described homesickness, a longing for the familiar, a nostalgic feeling, and an overwhelming

desire to return home to be with family and experience their accustomed environment and culture. From the responses, homesickness for participants of this study is a common experience. International students who participated in this study shared that they felt homesick regularly. Being thousands of miles or continents away from family, relatives, and their ancestral home and being in a new environment where they had to learn new culture and how things are done, which is entirely different from their home cultures, often evoked feelings of homesickness. According to the participants, navigating a new culture can be challenging. When faced with certain challenges, especially in communication and food, they remember and miss home and are often overtaken by an overwhelming feeling of homesickness. This feeling of homesickness makes them look for and connect with people from their homeland, seek out restaurants that serve their traditional food, or engage in activities that remind them of their culture. Unfortunately, in searching for restaurants that serve their traditional foods, international students have found that they are not able to find such on campus. This reality has further intensified their sense of isolation and feelings of homesickness. The lack of culturally relevant food options on campus has forced them to either adapt to unfamiliar food on campus, which they consider challenging and unsatisfying or spend extra time and resources seeking out these culturally relevant foods off-campus. This, participants said, leads to feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with their campus experience.

In my role as the researcher, I observed that while talking about homesickness, the participants were nostalgic, reflecting on home traditions and accustomed cultural practices regarding human social interactions and food. Each participant's story was like a trip down memory lane as they remembered the sights, sounds, and smells of their homeland. The

participants talked about home as a place, a geographic location, and where they kept special memories and customs passed down through generations. They remembered family gatherings, important ceremonies, tasty foods they made, and the social practices surrounding food and preparations that made them a part of the whole. The participants shared how their upbringing shaped who they are. For them, home meant sharing values, beliefs, and traditions. In their new environment and culture, they struggled with feeling like they belonged.

Despite feeling homesick, participants of this study found ways to cope. Some made friends with other people from their home country, creating close groups with which they navigated challenges together. Others found comfort in familiar routines and traditions. These familiar routines and traditions included making foods from their cultures to maintain their cultural identities and relieve homesickness. For these participants, finding support and comfort in their culture helps them to better adapt to their new environment.

Participant F shared their coping strategy, revealing that their homesickness and the unmet need for culturally relevant foods, which could be comfort foods, lead to a lack of sense of fit and serve as a driving force for their academic dedication. Their commitment to their books stems from a desire to excel academically and complete their studies, with the hopes of departing from the campus swiftly. Due to their discomfort on campus, participant F is only interested in attending classes, passing their exams, and going home. They do not participate in any activity on campus and keep to themselves. They do not feel any sort of connection to the campus community. Despite the liveliness of the campus life surrounding them, participant F remained an outsider, living a solitary life with a sense of detachment from the realities of the campus environment. Their disinterest in campus affairs shows how homesickness had impacted their

sense of belonging and engagement within the campus community. They said, “I’m just like a robot. I just want to pass my exams and get out of here.” For participant F, their way of coping with the feeling of homesickness is by focusing solely on their academics in the hopes that they would complete their years in school in record time and go back to their ancestral home. The anticipation of going back home fuels their resolve and dedication to their studies. Participant F’s coping mechanism shows a clear difference between how much they focus on their studies and how much they distance themselves emotionally. Their commitment to their academic pursuits served as a refuge and a shield against the discomfort of their environment, in this case, homesickness and the unavailability of comfort food.

On the other hand, participant G shared that their homesickness is heightened by not having access to culturally relevant foods that remind them of home and provide comfort during those difficult moments. This lack of familiar food options on campus makes it challenging for them to find relief from their homesickness, leading to prolonged feelings of unhappiness. Consequently, their emotional state significantly impacts their ability to engage in classroom activities, complete assignments, and perform well on exams. As a result, their academic performance suffers, often resulting in lower grades. In that sense, international students feel homesick, and culturally relevant food could alleviate it, but the absence of food to soothe their homesickness can affect their academics negatively or positively. However, it is important to recognize that while Participant F’s approach might seem positive on the surface, it is not positive in real terms. An integral part of the student campus experience involves participating in on-campus activities for personal and career development purposes, as well as building interpersonal and communication skills and establishing connections that could serve them

beyond the campus walls. These benefits and opportunities remain out of reach for Participant F and other international students in similar situations. This situation raises the question of whether they will be regarded as having fully experienced the educational system.

In these experiences shared above, the relationship between homesickness, access to culturally relevant food, and academic success among international students is seen. While culturally relevant food can alleviate feelings of homesickness, its absence can affect academic performance. Some international students may find alternative ways to cope with homesickness, leading to positive academic outcomes, while others may struggle to cope effectively, resulting in negative impacts on their grades. Hence, understanding the role of culturally relevant food in managing homesickness can provide valuable insights and direction for supporting the academic success and well-being of international students on the CWU Ellensburg campus.

Perception of Self

There are cultural perceptions of myself, which are maintained through the food we eat. Coming to CWU and eating greasing food caused me to add a lot of weight. This made me ashamed of myself because it was unacceptable in my culture to be that big.

(Participant H).

The statement above was made by a participant who comes from a culture with a peculiar outlook or perception of how a human body should look. Anything contrary to this is considered culturally inappropriate, and any individual who looks this way feels out of place culturally. During the interview, this participant showed shyness with their head bent over while sharing their experience. As an ethnographic researcher trained to read body language, I could tell the

discomfort and shame they felt at that moment as they narrated their experience. Their inability to maintain eye contact with me while sharing this particular experience is a testament to the fact that this situation had greatly affected their self-esteem and their sense of self and was a great deal of concern to them. This shows how cultural expectations can affect an individual's sense of identity and how they feel about themselves. From existing research, it is evident that self-esteem or a negative sense of self has significant implications for an individual's well-being. Understanding these feelings is important for studying the importance of access to culturally relevant food on campus.

Participant H's statement above highlights another challenge that the unavailability of culturally relevant food poses for international students. This challenge goes beyond dietary concerns but also relates to cultural identity and self-perception. The threat to their sense of self exacerbates their feelings of discomfort and unfitness in the campus community. Participant H's experience sheds light on the impact of dietary changes on their self-image. Coming from a culture where body image and weight management hold cultural significance, Participant H experienced deep feelings of shame and discomfort as they noticed changes in their body due to consuming unfamiliar campus foods. The clash between their cultural norms and physical appearance fueled feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, eroding their sense of self-worth and belonging within the campus environment. At first, Participant H happily embraced the opportunity to explore diverse culinary offerings, following their inability to find culturally relevant or familiar food on campus. They saw it as an opportunity to expand their palate and adapt to and embrace the cultural diversity of their new environment. This initial enthusiasm showed their willingness to step outside their comfort zone in search of culinary experiences that

could provide comfort in the absence of familiar foods from their home culture. However, their adventure soon took a different turn as they were confronted with the unintended effects of their dietary decisions. These effects include rapid weight gain, deterioration of their body image, and increased self-doubt. This impacted their interactions with others on campus and negatively influenced their dedication to their academics. As Participant H struggled with these emotions, a deep sense of insecurity and vulnerability clouded their self-perception and place within the university community. Likewise, another participant expressed feeling unimportant due to the absence of familiar food choices. The lack of culturally relevant foods was a clear sign validating their sense of being left out within the campus environment, making them feel even more isolated and inadequate. This deep feeling of disconnection affected how they interacted with others and their academic performance, making their existing struggles even harder and reducing their overall satisfaction and happiness in the campus environment.

From the foregoing narratives of the study participants, it is evident that the absence of culturally relevant food on campus has far-reaching implications for international students' overall well-being. These experiences point to a critical need for the school administration to prioritize cultural inclusivity in its policies and practices.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to document the role of culturally relevant food on international students' sense of belonging on the CWU Ellensburg campus. It also aimed to understand the relationship between international students' sense of belonging and culturally relevant food on campus and the practical implications of the presence or absence of culturally relevant food on campus. This study is significant as it is the first of its kind at CWU and provides in-depth knowledge on this topic. It documents key ethnographic data related to CWU's unique settings that may help in the future; both serve as the blueprint for more extensive research on the topic, as well as to tailor specific institutional policies directed to increase a sense of belonging among international students on campus. The implementation of such policies can potentially increase international student enrollment, which would increase school revenue. The findings of this study revealed that international students who participated in this study do not have access to their culturally relevant. Also, the absence of these culturally relevant has broader implications on their sense of fit on campus, mental health, and, consequently, academic performance. For international students on the CWU Ellensburg campus, access to culturally relevant food will 1) make them feel that their presence on campus is acknowledged and that they belong. 2) The absence of culturally relevant food negatively impacts their sense of belonging in the campus community, which in turn impacts their well-being and academic performance.

This study builds on previous works of literature on the relationship between access to culturally relevant food and international students' sense of belonging on campus. First, the

findings of this study contribute to existing literature regarding the role that the availability of culturally relevant food on campus plays in the sense of belonging of international students within the campus community. Existing literature highlights that it is important for students to feel a sense of belonging in their learning environment (Gray 2021), especially international students (Stewin 2013), as this drives international students' academic success and demonstrates inclusion and administrative support (Liz; Stewin 2023). Young et al. (2004) discuss the need for students to feel included in their learning environment as this increases their sense of safety and connection. Going by Malinowski's assertion that humans use culture as a means of adaptation, from these findings of this study, one can see how culture, in this case, culturally relevant food on campus as a fundamental element of culture, can serve as a vital adaptation tool for international students. However, with the absence of culturally relevant on campus, international students lack an adaptation tool, which has caused feelings of stress, feelings of alienation, and discomfort for international students.

Second, this study sheds light on the benefits of offering culturally relevant food options within on-campus dining and restaurant facilities for facilitating cultural conversations, exchanges, and educational experiences. Participants of this study highlight the benefits of sharing their culture and food story-sharing during the time they had a similitude of their cultural food on campus. These connections forged during this time not only fostered their sense of belonging on campus but further strengthened their resolve to remain a part of the campus community. This has greater implications for not just international student enrollment but also long-term retention rates. Opportunities to exchange culinary stories serve as a platform for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, enriching the college experience for all students

and fostering a campus culture that celebrates diversity and fosters meaningful connections. By acknowledging and catering to the needs of the diverse cultural backgrounds represented in the student population through food offerings, CWU can create an inclusive environment that not only attracts but also sustains an engaged and vibrant campus community.

Third, the findings of this study reveal also that the absence of culturally relevant food leads to social exclusion for international students. The participants of this study revealed that the absence of culturally relevant food on campus negatively impacts their willingness to participate in campus events and activities as they feel like they do not belong in such circles. This aligns with existing research that college students who feel a sense of belonging tend to be more inclined to make use of campus resources, participate in opportunities, and take active steps to persist and succeed (Strayhorn 2018; Yeager et al. 2016). These participants and other international students in similar situations who are not motivated or willing to participate in the social realities on campus are isolated and excluded from social connections. Isolation from social connections has a great impact on physical well-being and mental health. Holt-Lunstad (2018) noted that humans have the inherent need for social connection, and according to Cacioppo and Patrick (2008), social disconnection is detrimental to the mental and physical health of individuals (Cacioppo & Patrick 2008; Cacioppo et al. 1015; Holt-Lunstad 2018). which could often lead to isolation, loneliness, or depression (Baumeister & Leary 1995). Beyond the physical and health impacts of social exclusion, visibility is necessary for engagement. International students being present in spaces on campus lays the foundation for international student engagement and success.

Fourth, International students' perception of institutional support plays a role in their sense of inclusion. The participants of this study describe their feelings of alienation from the food decisions made on campus; this perception of being overlooked eroded their confidence and self-esteem, affecting their academic performance and overall satisfaction with their university experience. This aligns with Ingram (2012), which highlighted that feeling supported in a learning environment contributes to a sense of belonging.

Fifth, the findings from this study show that homesickness is a common experience among international students who participated, with consequences ranging from emotional to mental. From the findings, we see the impact on well-being, academic performance, and overall campus experience. The participants' use of culturally relevant food to relive home traditions and memories and alleviate homesickness aligns with Stewin (2013), who found that culturally relevant food helps to soothe homesickness. This suggests that culturally relevant foods can serve as a comforting reminder of home, providing emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Considering the implications of unmanaged homesickness, including anxiety and social isolation, it is important to provide culturally relevant food on campus for international students. This can help to support international students' mental and emotional well-being and enhance their college experience, thereby boosting international student recruitment and retention rates as students who feel supported and connected to their cultural heritage are more likely to complete their studies (Wright et al. 2021; Skinner 2019). Studies also show that students who experience homesickness are more prone to leaving school than those who do not experience homesickness (Thurber & Walton 2012).

From the foregoing, it is evident that culturally relevant food plays a huge role in the sense of belonging of international students on campus. Given the importance of culturally relevant food as a means of adaptation to a new environment and the fundamental human need to feel a sense of belonging in their environment, coupled with the implications of a lack of sense of belonging in the university environment, it is crucial that the school administration provides access to culturally relevant food on campus for international students.

As the researcher, during these interviews, it was common to witness the participants reflect on their journey at CWU and their student experiences, wishing they had it better. Conducting these interviews provided insights into the lived experiences and challenges faced by international students at CWU. Through their narratives, participants shared the things that brought them happiness, the difficulties they faced, and their hopes for the future. By sharing these stories, they provided insights into the process of adapting to a new culture and navigating issues related to their sense of self and belonging within the university environment. In that sense, their narrative gave me, the researcher, a glimpse into the complex journey to a new cultural context and negotiating one's identity while pursuing higher education.

To address this issue effectively, the school administration and dining services should consider implementing initiatives that cater to the diverse culinary preferences and cultural backgrounds of the student population. This could involve collaborating with the International Students' Office and international students to identify culturally relevant food and ensure their availability in campus dining halls and food pantries through surveys and focus groups to plan quarterly food menus.

Second, the dining services, in partnership with the Center for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, should host cooking workshops and cultural food events to showcase the culinary diversity of the student population. Additionally, providing resources such as a multicultural center and an international students' kitchen where culturally relevant food ingredients will be provided for international students to make their own food. However, addressing these challenges goes beyond diversifying the menu; it speaks to the broader need for inclusivity and cultural representation on the campus. The Office of Student Engagement and Success should promote campus cultural heritage by organizing programs, events, and activities that honor and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of all students. By embracing and celebrating the culinary diversity of its student population, CWU can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment where every student feels valued and supported. From menu adjustments to cultural events and collaborations, there are various ways school administration can demonstrate its commitment to diversity and inclusion, ultimately enriching the campus experiences of all its students regardless of nationality.

Recognizing the importance of food as a social and cultural medium, CWU can take steps to ensure that all students feel valued and represented in their dining experiences, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion. Integrating culturally relevant food into campus dining options not only addresses the dietary needs of international students but also acknowledges and celebrates their heritage. It sends a powerful message that their cultures are valued and respected within the university community. This recognition can have far-reaching effects beyond the dining hall, influencing international students' overall sense of belonging and academic success.

Finally, these findings showcase the nuances of cultural adaptation and integration, shedding light on how access to familiar foods contributes to the sense of belonging of international students and to their overall well-being and transition to campus life. By expanding the understanding of the multidimensional nature of belongingness and the factors that influence it, this study aimed to improve support initiatives and policy development that ensure equity, diversity, and representation for international students, enhancing the university experience for diverse student populations and benefiting the school through student retention and recruitment.

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Appendix

Appendix -- Data Collection Instrument

International students face unique challenges adjusting to their new environment, such as homesickness and a lack of sense of belonging. However, existing literature has shown that accessing and consuming culturally relevant foods helps relieve homesickness and foster a sense of belonging and connection to their new environment. The aim of this study is to understand the relationship between international students sense of belonging and culturally relevant food on campus here at CWU. This interview is for research purposes only.

1. How important is food in your culture and daily life, and how has that changed since arriving at Central Washington University (CWU)?
2. What is your food experience on campus?
3. What does belonging on campus mean to you?
4. Do you have access to your cultural food on campus? If not, describe how you would feel if you had access to your cultural food on campus.
5. Can you describe when you felt a strong sense of belonging on campus? How did food contribute to that experience?
6. Have you found any local grocery stores or on-campus restaurants that provide culturally relevant food? How frequently do you visit them?
7. Have you ever experienced homesickness? If so, how has food played a role in coping

with it?

8. Can you describe when you felt disconnected from your cultural identity while at CWU?

Did food play a role in that experience?

9. How important is it for CWU to provide culturally relevant food options for international students?

10. Are there any specific cultural foods you miss from home and cannot find on campus?

How does that affect your sense of belonging?

11. How has your sense of belonging at CWU changed since you first arrived, and how has food impacted that change?

12. Do you feel the lack of culturally relevant food on campus affects your academic performance or mental well-being?

13. Are there any particular foods or dishes you have tried since arriving at CWU that you have come to enjoy, even if they are not from your culture?

14. How do you typically socialize with other international students on campus, and does food play a role in those interactions?

15. Have you had any experiences with discrimination or stereotyping related to food or your culture while at CWU?

16. Do you feel that the lack of culturally relevant food options on campus affects your willingness to participate in campus events and activities?

17. Can you describe a time when you felt that the lack of culturally relevant food options on campus was particularly challenging?

18. How important is it for you to maintain a connection to your cultural identity while at

CWU, and how does food play a role in that connection?

19. What challenges have you faced finding culturally relevant food on campus?

20. Have you had any positive experiences with CWU staff or faculty members who have supported your cultural identity through food or other means?

21. Can you describe a time when you felt that the presence of culturally relevant food on campus positively impacted your academic or personal life?

22. If you could suggest one change to the food options available on campus to support international students' sense of belonging better, what would it be?