

Chapter 2

Increasing Awareness: Cultural Food Experiences of International Students in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The authors situate student food experience as a key source of tension for international students. Multicultural food learning activities (MFLAs) are positioned as spaces for cultural connection and knowledge exchange. Through a review of relevant literature, three themes emerge: 1) food, diet and culture, 2) acculturation and identity through social connections with food, and 3) the implications of lack of food on culture, identity, and well-being. Reflecting on the authors' personal applications of MFLAs within nutrition curricula and a student-led society supporting cultural integration, the implications of such a learning platform are illuminated. In response to emergent themes, the authors share observations and make recommendations for university-based programming and future research. The authors urge academic communities to consider the complexity and impact of student food experiences when contemplating the international student experience in Canada. Food learning and experience-based platforms are opportunities to support student culture and identity.

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BACKGROUND

Studying abroad has become common practice for students wishing to participate in higher education. International registrations at Canadian postsecondary programs have almost doubled between 2009 and 2015 (Institute of International Education, Inc., 2020; Statistics Canada, 2019). Canada, known as a multicultural country, adopted multiculturalism as an official policy in 1971 (Government of Canada, 2012). In 1988, *The Canadian Multicultural Act* was passed, which promotes a celebration of diversity and ensures respect and equal treatment nationwide (Uberoi, 2016). Nonetheless, international students in Canada have experienced tremendous hardships and challenges during their acculturation journey (Spencer-Oatey, Dauber, Jing, & Lifei, 2017; Xing & Bolden, 2019). Numerous acculturative stressors have been identified, such as language, discrimination, feelings of marginality and alienation, lowered mental health status and identity confusion (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Vasilopoulos, 2016). Such stressors are purported to negatively affect international students' overall well-being and their academic experience.

Perhaps not as well understood are the relationships that exist with food experiences, student culture and identity. For example, Brown, Edwards, and Hartwell (2010) identified food as an important component of a successful acculturation process among international students. Kang (2014) indicated the original culture of international students was linked through food. Amos and Lordly (2014) found that food served as both a source of comfort, but also elicited homesickness in international students. Montanari (2006) described food as “an extraordinary vehicle of self-representation and of cultural exchange—a means of establishing identity to be sure, but also the first way of entering into contact with a different culture” (p. 133). Almerico (2014) described food as an expression of identity.

Food, as experienced by international students, can both contribute to or detract from the student experience. Saccone (2015) revealed resistance to new food amongst international students could be linked to compromised health (Alyousif & Mathews, 2018) and academic performance (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Food insecurity was identified as impacting both personal and academic well-being (Hanbazaza et al., 2017; Pereira, 2020). As a result, disrupted well-being emerged as a threat to positive acculturation.

Through a review of literature that identifies food-related issues students face, the authors intend to describe how food, culture and identity interact to influence the international student experience in Canadian higher education. Additionally, the authors introduce two examples of multicultural food learning activities (MFLAs) they have used to support cultural integration on campus. The chapter demonstrates how students' culture and identity are manifested socially through food. Acculturation within the host society involves not only exploring and learning about new foods, but also maintaining connections with familiar cultural foods and food experiences which support well-being. The objectives of the chapter are to: 1) identify food experience as a key source of tension for many transitioning students, 2) position multicultural food learning activities (MFLAs) as spaces for cultural connection and knowledge exchange, 3) offer recommendations for those seeking to improve food experiences in a multicultural context, and 4) suggest areas of future research.

INTRODUCTION

Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) is an urban campus in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, promoting small class size and personalized learning. The university hosts approximately 4000 students from

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