

## Research Abstract

Not on the Menu: Korean Students'

Experiences of Food and Belonging in Higher Education

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This qualitative study examines how Korean American undergraduate students interpret and experience food within campus and local food environments at a public research university on the West Coast, referred to by the pseudonym Uri University. Drawing on semi-structured individual interviews with sixteen Korean American undergraduates, three "gimbap chat" group sessions in which participants cooked and ate gimbap (Korean rice rolls) together while talking, dining hall observations, systematic analysis of dining hall menus, and contextual interviews with campus staff, I explore the emotions, memories, and cultural meanings Korean American students attach to their on-campus dining experiences and examine how those meanings shape their interpretations of campus food environments and their sense of belonging. The gimbap chat, developed for this study, draws on Suda (수다), a Korean practice of relational, unhurried conversation theorized as a decolonizing research methodology, and was designed to surface collective, culturally grounded reflection that individual interviews alone did not consistently produce.

Guided by the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model and Suda, I find that campus dining systems organized around White, Western, and standardized food norms produce experiences of cultural exclusion, emotional hunger (허기짐/heogijim), and diminished sense of belonging. Students described a persistent gap between the physical adequacy of their meal plans and the emotional and cultural adequacy of the food provided, alongside a pattern of internalized deservingness in which students minimized or withdrew their own critiques of campus dining even after describing its shortcomings in detail. I propose an expansion of the CECE framework, termed the Culturally Nourishing Food Environment indicator, and offer methodological contributions through the gimbap chat format as a culturally grounded, replicable research method. Findings have implications for higher education policy, campus dining practice, and the design of culturally responsive institutional environments.