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Not on the Menu: Korean American Students'
Experiences of Food and Belonging in Higher Education

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Damhee D. Hong

Committee in charge:

Professor Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Chair

Professor Hui-Ling Malone

Professor Antar Tichavakunda

June 2026

The dissertation of Damhee D. Hong is approved.

Hui-Ling Malone

Antar Tichavakunda

Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Committee Chair

May 2026

Acknowledgments

A dissertation is, on paper, a solitary endeavor. I am only allowed to put my name as the author. However, as I will describe here, this dissertation was anything but a solitary project.

I am endlessly grateful to my faculty advisor, Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, who patiently guided me through every step of this process. From the most foundational questions to the most painstaking revisions, she was there, reviewing, meeting, encouraging, and occasionally breaking into song, which turned out to be exactly the kind of mentorship I didn't know I needed. Thank you for always being in my corner, without hesitation and without fail. I am equally grateful to my committee members, Dr. Hui-Ling Malone, who showed me that kindness and courage are not in tension with rigorous scholarship, and Dr. Antar Tichavakunda, who encouraged me to pursue the research that lives in my heart while reminding me to honor the scholars who came before me and carry their work forward with grace. I am a better researcher for knowing all three of them. I am also grateful to the many faculty members across our university who advised, taught, and supported me along the way. Every encounter left something with me.

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To my research participants, thank you for your openness and frankness, and for eating gimbap with me. So many of you stayed well beyond our promised time and shared your brilliant minds so freely. I hope I have done your words justice.

My parents took our early immigrant journey, one that could have been marked only by hardship, and filled it with joy. I have such vivid memories of my **아버지** (dad) making us waffles on weekends, or taking us to the swap meet for churros, which made my transition to a new country so gentle and fun. My **엄마** (mom) speaks love most fluently through food, famously sending homemade Korean food to wherever I am, even when I was living in Korea, which is the most stubbornly loving thing I have ever witnessed. When I asked her for her gimbap recipe to use as part of my research, she explained over and over again that the most important ingredient is the care and love you fold into it. Without her showing me that, this research would not exist. I also want to thank my little brother, who helped me process all of this in the firmly encouraging way that only he can. I am sorry I yelled at you when we were little. To my in-laws, thank you for your endless warmth and encouragement. I have been so lucky to have a mother-in-law so warm and loving that I joke with my husband that she is my mom now, and a father-in-law whose encouragement when I was first considering returning to graduate school gave me the courage to actually take that step. They taught me how to find delight in the in-between places, and that lesson lives in everything I do.

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To all of you: thank you for writing this with me.

Curriculum Vitae

Damhee D. Hong

213-999-3981 | Sunnyvale, CA | hongdamhee@gmail.com | damhee.com

EDUCATION

University of California, Santa Barbara Expected June 2026
Ph.D., Education

- Dissertation Thesis Title: “Not on the Menu: Korean American Students’ Experiences of Food and Belonging in Higher Education”
- Committee: Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj (chair), Dr. Antar Tichavakunda, Dr. Hui-Ling Malone

Northwestern University Dec. 2020
M.S., Higher Education Administration and Policy

- Thesis Title: “But Where Are You Really From: Korean American Ethnic Identity Development”

University of Hawai’i at Mānoa June 2019
Graduate Certificate, Asian Studies

University of California, San Diego June 2009
B.A., Political Science – International Relations

CERTIFICATION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education Certificate Expected Dec. 2026
University of San Diego

Certificate in Inclusive Teaching Nov. 2024
University of California, Santa Barbara

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Doctoral Dissertation Research Jan. 2025 – Current
UC Santa Barbara | *Advisors: Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Dr. Antar Tichavakunda, Dr. Hui-Ling Malone*

Research Assistant Jan. 2024 – Current
UC Santa Barbara | *Advisor: Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj*

Independent Research Project Jan. 2022 – Dec. 2023
UC Santa Barbara | *Advisor: Dr. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj, Dr. Tarek Azzam*

Graduate Research Assistant Sept. 2021 – June 2023
Advisor: Dr. Linda Adler-Kassner UC Santa Barbara

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, ED 125 Schooling in the US Sept. 2024 – Aug. 2025
Gevirtz School of Education, UC Santa Barbara

Teaching Assistant, Korean Language 2 and 5 Jan. 2025 – Mar. 2025
East Asian Languages & Cultural Studies, UC Santa Barbara

Graduate Teaching Fellow, *School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society (SKILLS)* Jan.2024 – June 2024
San Marcos High School, Santa Barbara and UC Santa Barbara

Teaching Assistant, *ED 123 Culture, Development, and Education* Sept. 2023 – Dec. 2023
Gevirtz School of Education, UC Santa Barbara

Teaching Assistant, *SOC POL 332: Economics of the University* Apr. 2020 – June 2020
School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University

English Teacher / Education Volunteer Apr. 2012 – June 2014
Slahung High School, Peace Corps Indonesia

English Teacher July 2009 – Sept. 2010
Veritas Associate English Academy, South Korea

PUBLICATIONS

Sattin-Bajaj, C., Romo-González, L., & **Hong, D.** (2025). Building Classroom Relationships Through Photovoice: What Immigrant-Origin Students Want Their Teachers to Know and Understand about Them. *The Elementary School Journal*, 000–000. <https://doi.org/10.1086/735473>

Sattin-Bajaj, C., Barrera Alcazar, J., **Hong, D.**, & Romo-González, M. (2023). An expanded framework for preparing teachers to educate children of immigrant backgrounds. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 129, 104120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104120>

PRESENTATIONS & INVITED TALKS

Hong, D. (April 2026). “Beyond the Hype: Critical and Inclusive Uses of AI for Student Success.” Workshop Presentation at the 2026 Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) National Conference, Anaheim, CA.

Hong, D. (April 2026). “Eating Together, Standing Strong: Food, Legacy, and Belonging among Korean American Students.” Panel Presentation at the 2026 Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE) National Conference, Anaheim, CA.

Hong, D. (April 2026). “Not on the Menu: Korean American Students’ Reflections on Campus Food and Belonging.” Roundtable Presentation at the 2026 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, CA.

Hong, D. (April 2026). “More than a Meal: Korean Food, Emotional Hunger, and Belonging Among Korean American College Students.” Research Paper Presentation at the 2026 Korean-American Educational Researchers Association (K-AERA) Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, CA.

Hong, D., Rodriguez, R. (November 2025). “Navigating the PhD Journey.”, Guest Lecture, ED 200A: Education Proseminar, Gevirtz School of Education, UC Santa Barbara, CA.

Hong, D. (September 2025). “Using AI as Your Study Buddy.” Invited speaker at the 2025 Black AI: Inclusive Innovation for All Conference, Santa Barbara, CA.

Hong, D. (May 2025). “A Study Buddy, Not a Shortcut: An Asset-Based Approach to Cultivating Ethical Usage of AI.” Poster presentation at the 2025 AI Community of Practice Spring Symposium, Santa Barbara, CA.

Hong, D. (April 2025). “Feeding Diversity: Toward Culturally Sustaining School Food.” Poster Presentation at the 2025 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Denver, CO.

Hong, D. (February 2025). “Interpretation and Translation Service at K-12 School District Websites.” Guest Lecture, ED 197: Special Topics in Education, Gevirtz School of Education, UC Santa Barbara, CA.

Hong, D. (April 2024). “Provision and Accessibility of Interpretation and Translation Services on K-12 School District Websites.” Roundtable session presented at the 2024 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.

Sattin-Bajaj, C., Romo-González, M., **Hong, D.** (April 2024). “Building Classroom Relationships Through Photovoice.” Roundtable session presented at the 2024 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA.

Sattin-Bajaj, C., Barrera Alcazar, J., **Hong, D.**, & Romo-González, M. (April 2023). “An Expanded Framework for Preparing Teachers to Educate Children of Immigrant Backgrounds.” Paper session presented at the 2023 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.

Hong, D., Su, J., Barrera Alcazar, J., Romo-González, M. (May 2022). “Teacher Preparation for Immigrant-origin Children.” Paper session presented at the GGSE Research Symposium 2022, Santa Barbara, CA

Nissen, S., Tolman, S., and **Hong, D.** (March 2020). “A Crucial Intersection: International Student Career Advising.” Conference session presented at the International Educators of Illinois 2020 Annual Conference, Bloomington, IL.

MEDIA/PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

“A Plate of School Food with a Side of Belonging: Scholar Spotlight,” *Feminist Food Journal*, Oct 7, 2025 (Interview), <https://www.feministfoodjournal.com/p/a-plate-of-school-food-with-a-side>

ADMINISTRATIVE & PROGRAMMING EXPERIENCE

International Graduate Student Peer Advisor <i>Graduate Student Resource Center</i> UC Santa Barbara	July 2022 – Aug. 2024 Santa Barbara, CA
--	--

Graduate Intern <i>SESP Leadership Institute</i> Northwestern University	Feb. 2021 – June 2021 Evanston, IL
--	---------------------------------------

Virtual Course Moderator <i>Kellogg School of Management</i> Northwestern University	Sept. 2020 – Mar. 2021 Evanston, IL
--	--

Graduate Assistant/ Career Advisor <i>Medill School of Journalism</i> Northwestern University	Sept. 2019 – July 2020 Evanston, IL
---	--

Coordinator for Conduct and Community Standards (full-time) <i>Student Housing Services</i> University of Hawai'i at Mānoa	Nov.2016 – June 2019 Honolulu, HI
--	--------------------------------------

Student Services Specialist/ Admissions Officer (full-time) <i>International Education Center</i> Santa Monica College	Oct. 2014 – June 2016 Santa Monica, CA
--	---

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Korean Translator for Immigration Resource Documents UC Immigrant Legal Services Center	Oct. 2025 – Current University of California (Virtual)
---	---

Conversation Teacher	Jan.2023 – June 2024
-----------------------------	----------------------

English Conversation Program

UC Santa Barbara

Vice President of Communication and Social Media

July 2022 – July 2023

Graduate Student Association in Education

UC Santa Barbara

FELLOWSHIPS & AWARDS

David L. Clark National Graduate Research Seminar Scholar	2026
UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education Dissertation Grant	2025
Fourth Place, Poster Presentation Award at the 2025 AI Community of Practice Spring Symposium.	2025
UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education Block Grant Award	2024
UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education Block Grant Award	2023
UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education Block Grant Award	2022
UCSB Gevirtz Graduate School of Education Block Grant Award	2021

MEMBERSHIPS/ AFFILIATIONS

American Educational Research Association (AERA)	May 2022 – Present
National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)	Feb.017 – Present

SKILLS

Languages: Fluent in Korean; Conversational in Bahasa Indonesia

Digital & Collaboration Tools: Google Suite (Drive, Docs, Sheets, Calendar), Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Publisher), Zoom, Outlook, Adobe Photoshop

Research & Data Tools: Dedoose (qualitative coding), Qualtrics (survey research), data visualization

Higher Education Systems: Maxient, Advocate, Banner, fsaAtlas, Odyssey, Handshake

Additional: Website content management, email newsletter authoring and distribution, event programming and logistics, grant-funded research administration, donor/sponsor outreach and stewardship

Abstract

Not on the Menu: Korean American Students’

Experiences of Food and Belonging in Higher Education

By

Damhee D. Hong

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, “gimbap chat” group conversation sessions, dining hall observations, systemic analysis of dining hall menus, and contextual institutional interviews, 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. Guided by the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model and Suda, a Korean cultural conversational practice theorized as a decolonizing research methodology, 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. 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 research method. Findings have implications for higher education policy, campus dining practice, and the design of culturally responsive institutional environments.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In October 2025, an animated film titled *K-Pop Demon Hunters* gained popularity on a global streaming platform. In an early scene of this film, members of a K-pop group prepare for a major performance together. As they discuss the scale of the show, one character announces that this will require “the most carb loading,” prompting the group to chant “For the fans!” as they joyously and speedily consume large amounts of gimbap and instant ramyeon (Kang & Appelhans, 2025). The scene is played for humor, yet it reflects widely recognized features of Korean food culture in which eating is closely tied to collective effort, shared energy, and social connection rather than individual consumption alone (Oh & Lee, 2004). Scholarship on Korean foodways emphasizes that food practices are grounded in collectivism, mutual support, and shared dishes placed at the center of the table, where meals are completed through mixing, combination, and communal participation in eating (Oh & Lee, 2004). Korean cuisine has also been described as a symbolic cultural system in which food functions not only as nutrition but as a carrier of meaning, relationship, and social values, including harmony, care, and emotional bonds among people (Jung, 2015). Although fictional, this scene from the film *K-Pop Demon Hunters* resonates with these cultural patterns by portraying food as preparation, fuel, and shared ritual connected to effort, endurance, and collective purpose rather than mere individual appetite.

The relational grammar of Korean food also extends beyond fictional representation into the rhythms of everyday life, where food is embedded in language, routine, and social interaction. A common greeting among Koreans is not “How are you?” but “Have you eaten?” or “Have you eaten rice?” (식사 하셨어요? / 밥 먹었어?), a phrase that functions as a routine greeting while signaling concern for well-being. Kim (2012) explains that this

expression emerged from historical experiences of scarcity and reflects how centrally food is positioned in Korean social consciousness. Korean food culture research likewise notes that eating practices are closely tied to collectivism and mutual support, with shared meals serving as an important site of sociability and relational bonding (Oh & Lee, 2004). In many households, daily schedules continue to be organized around mealtimes, and the shared meal format, often structured around rice (밥/bap) and side dishes (반찬/banchan), reinforces norms of participation, attentiveness, and interdependence at the table (Jung, 2015; Oh & Lee, 2004). Kim (2012) argues that bap signifies far more than a staple grain, functioning as a metonym for life, livelihood, and the full range of human activity tied to sustaining oneself and others.

Despite the cultural centrality of food in Korean life, its significance is rarely examined within educational contexts (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). In higher education, food is most often treated as a logistical service rather than as a cultural or relational practice (Cleveland, 2023; Li et al., 2022). Campus dining systems are typically organized around standardized menus shaped by Western and Eurocentric food norms (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Goodwin, 2010). These systems prioritize efficiency, cost, and uniformity. As a result, culturally specific foods such as Korean dishes are often limited in availability or offered only occasionally (Dhillon et al., 2019; Agaronov et al., 2019). When they do appear, they are frequently detached from the cultural meanings attached to them outside the institution (Agaronov et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). This organization of food provision contributes to the invisibility of students' cultural food practices in everyday campus life (Weaver-Hightower, 2022).

This contrast reveals a gap in how institutions understand student experience. For many Korean American students, Korean food remains culturally meaningful as a source of comfort, familiarity, and memory (Locher et al., 2005; Jung, 2015). Yet within higher education environments, food is rarely examined as part of how students interpret belonging or care (Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Cleveland, 2023). The disconnect between the personal and cultural significance of food and its institutional treatment as a neutral service raises questions about how campus environments recognize or overlook students' lived experiences (Strayhorn, 2012; Museus, 2014). Rather than assuming food is peripheral to academic life, this study treats food as a meaningful part of students' daily negotiations of place and identity (Kuh et al., 2000; Yosso, 2005). By foregrounding food as a culturally embedded practice, this research reframes campus dining as a site where belonging and institutional care are interpreted and evaluated (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012).

Background and Broader Context

Within educational institutions, food is most often framed in terms of nutrition, cost, or operational efficiency, positioned as a background service that supports academic life rather than as a dimension of student experience that shapes identity and belonging (Cleveland, 2023; Li et al., 2022; Nazmi et al., 2019). This framing limits how institutions understand the role of food in students' daily lives and forecloses attention to its cultural dimensions (Weaver-Hightower, 2011, 2022).

Campus dining systems are typically organized around White, Western, and standardized food norms (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Goodwin, 2010). Menus are designed to appeal to a presumed mainstream palate and to be produced at scale (Cleveland, 2023; Li et al., 2022). Meals are often structured around familiar Western categories such as entrée, side,

and dessert, with limited attention to how other food traditions organize meals differently (Kittler et al., 2017; Weaver-Hightower, 2022). In this context, cultural foods are frequently introduced as special features rather than as routine offerings (Yano & Adams, 2013; Dhillon et al., 2019). Institutional priorities emphasize cost control, nutritional metrics, and consistency across dining locations (Li et al., 2022; Cleveland, 2023). These priorities shape not only what food is served but also how food is conceptualized within the institution (Cleveland, 2023). Food becomes an object of management rather than a cultural practice embedded in students' lives (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Cleveland, 2023).

In contrast, scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies has long treated food as a site of meaning, identity, and social life (Chen, 2009; Kneafsey et al., 2021). Food has been examined as a medium through which culture is transmitted, relationships are formed, and memories are sustained (Chen, 2009; Locher et al., 2005). Researchers in these fields have shown how meals are tied to migration, diaspora, and the maintenance of cultural continuity (Gabaccia, 2010; Ruis, 2017). Food is understood not simply as consumption but as practice, ritual, and expression (Chen, 2009; Jung, 2015). This body of work demonstrates that what people eat and how they eat cannot be separated from broader social and historical contexts (Kneafsey et al., 2021; Gabaccia, 2010).

Despite this rich interdisciplinary scholarship, higher education research has paid comparatively little attention to food as culture (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). Studies of campus dining tend to emphasize satisfaction, health outcomes, or financial accessibility rather than cultural meaning (Li et al., 2022; Nazmi et al., 2019). When food is discussed, it is often treated as a variable influencing retention or wellness rather than as a lens for understanding belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). As a result, the

cultural dimensions of eating in college remain under-theorized (Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Wright et al., 2021). This gap is particularly notable given that food is one of the most routine and embodied aspects of student life (Li et al., 2022).

Within this context, Korean American students represent an important yet underexamined population for understanding how culturally meaningful food shapes students' experiences in higher education (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2024). Precise enrollment data for Korean American students specifically is difficult to locate, as federal and institutional reporting typically aggregates all Asian American students into a single category, obscuring the distinct demographic presence of individual ethnic groups within it (Maramba, 2011; Museus & Truong, 2009; Schweis, 2021). This aggregation means Korean American students are often assumed to be well served by existing campus structures, their particular cultural needs rendered invisible within the broader Asian American category (Poon et al., 2016; Museus & Yi, 2017). Such assumptions obscure meaningful differences in cultural background, immigration history, and everyday experience that disaggregated research consistently reveals to be significant (Teranishi et al., 2009; Lee, 2006). Korean American students are rarely centered in research on campus dining or in studies of how food relates to belonging, and their food practices are typically absent from institutional discussions of diversity and inclusion (Tran, 2024; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012; Goodwin, 2010; Museus et al., 2017). This absence limits understanding of how culturally meaningful food shapes students' interpretations of care and inclusion in higher education (Wright et al., 2021).

Taken together, these patterns suggest that food is largely conceptualized within higher education as a matter of service delivery rather than as a culturally meaningful part of

student life (Cleveland, 2023; Li et al., 2022). This framing has consequences for any student whose cultural food practices fall outside the white, Western norms that campus dining systems tend to reflect (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Goodwin, 2010), a condition documented across a range of minoritized student populations (Agaronov et al., 2019; Dhillon et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Examining any one group's experiences in depth requires choosing a specific community without implying that community's needs are more urgent than others'. This study centers Korean American students not because their experiences are more significant than those of other culturally minoritized groups, but because attending to a specific cultural community allows for the kind of close, disaggregated analysis that broad categories obscure (Teranishi et al., 2009; Tran, 2024). Korean American students are a particularly productive lens for this inquiry because they are routinely subsumed under aggregated Asian American data, making their specific food-related experiences effectively invisible in both research and institutional practice (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012; Becerra et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2023). This lack of clarity points to a need for closer examination of a specific community's experiences as one example of how campus dining's cultural defaults shape students' sense of belonging (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012), with implications that extend beyond any one group.

Problem Statement

Campus dining systems have been documented as organized around white, Western, and standardized food norms that do not reflect the cultural practices of all students they serve (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Goodwin, 2010; Cleveland, 2023). While limited, the few existing research that examines the cultural mismatch between minoritized student populations and campus food environments suggest that students may experience negative

impact to their identity and well-being (Agaronov et al., 2019; Dhillon et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). This study examines that dynamic through the experiences of Korean American students, consistent with scholarly calls to disaggregate Asian American student research and attend to the specific rather than the general (Teranishi et al., 2009; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2024). Korean American students navigate campus food environments that may not reflect their cultural foodways (Dhillon et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Within institutional dining systems designed to serve large and diverse student populations, meals are often standardized, making it uncertain whether Korean foods or Korean meal structures are meaningfully represented (Li et al., 2022; Weaver-Hightower, 2022). As a result, Korean American students may need to adapt their eating practices or substitute available foods for culturally familiar ones (Agaronov et al., 2019; Klobodu et al., 2021). These adaptations are not inherently problematic, but their meanings and implications for students' daily lives remain largely unexplored (Wright et al., 2021). Little is known about how Korean American students interpret these food environments or how they make sense of their eating practices within them (Tran, 2024; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012).

These uncertainties exist within broader institutional patterns that render Korean identity less visible (Museus & Yi, 2017; Lee, 2006). Korean American students are frequently subsumed under broader Asian American categories, reinforcing assumptions of a single, uniform Asian experience (Teranishi et al., 2009; Poon et al., 2016). The persistence of the model minority myth further contributes to perceptions that Korean American students are well-served by existing campus structures and do not require particular attention (Poon et al., 2016; Museus et al., 2017). Such assumptions limit institutional recognition of cultural specificity in everyday domains such as food (Lee, 2006; Teranishi et al., 2009). As a result,

the cultural meanings Korean American students attach to food are rarely foregrounded in institutional discussions of student experience (Tran, 2024).

Although food plays an important role in shaping identity, memory, and well-being in everyday life, students' cultural interpretations of food in college settings remain largely unexamined (Wright et al., 2021; Buell et al., 2021). Food is a routine and embodied part of student life, yet its role in how students understand belonging and care within educational institutions is not well understood (Strayhorn, 2012; Museus, 2014). Campus dining environments may operate as sites of cultural connection and care for Korean American students, or as sites of cultural disconnection — and that distinction has not yet been examined (Wright et al., 2021; Dhillon et al., 2019). Without attention to students' own perspectives, food environments continue to be evaluated primarily through operational or nutritional lenses rather than through lived experience (Li et al., 2022; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). This limits understanding of how everyday institutional practices shape students' sense of inclusion and recognition (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012).

This study addresses two interrelated gaps in what is currently known. First, there is limited understanding of how food, culture, and belonging intersect in higher education contexts (Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Wright et al., 2021), a gap with consequences for any student whose cultural food practices diverge from institutional defaults (Agaronov et al., 2019; Klobodu et al., 2021). Second, little is known about Korean American students' food experiences in particular (Tran, 2024; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012). Centering this community reflects a methodological commitment to specificity over generalization, one that challenges the tendency to treat Asian American students as a monolith (Teranishi et al., 2009; Poon et al., 2016) and surfaces how white normative institutional design operates for a group that is

often presumed to be well-served (Lee, 2006; Museus & Yi, 2017). Studying Korean American students offers insight into how food operates for U.S.-raised or long-term diasporic students, not only international students, and positions the findings as one example of a broader institutional problem rather than an isolated community concern. These gaps take on particular shape at Uri University, where institutional structure and geographic location create a specific set of conditions under which Korean American students encounter food and food environments.

Institutional and Population Context

I conducted this research at Uri University, a public research university on the West Coast with federal designations as both a Minority-Serving Institution and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander–Serving Institution (AANAPISI) (Uri University Website, n.d.). The university enrolls a diverse undergraduate population and draws students from across California and beyond (Uri University Website, 2023). While on-campus housing is not required for students of Uri University, 95% of first-year students and 38% of undergraduates overall reside in university housing facilities (The Princeton Review, n.d.), and for students who live on campus, a meal plan is a mandatory component of the room and board package. Asian American students constitute just under 30% of the undergraduate population, yet Korean American students remain a relatively small and frequently uncounted subgroup within that demographic, typically reported within aggregated Asian or Asian American categories rather than as a distinct population (Uri University Website, 2023). The university is also situated in a geographic context with limited access to Korean restaurants and grocery stores, meaning that for many Korean American students, campus dining is the most structurally and geographically available place

to find food on a regular basis. Together, these conditions make Uri University a particularly productive site for examining how institutional food environments shape Korean American students' experiences of belonging and care. The research site and campus dining system are described in fuller detail in Chapter 3.

Purpose of Study

In this qualitative study, I examine how Korean American students interpret and experience food within campus and local food environments in higher education (Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Wright et al., 2021). Rather than treating food as a neutral service, I approached food as a culturally meaningful practice through which students make sense of care, inclusion, and belonging (Museus, 2014; Chen, 2009). Specifically, I explore the emotions, memories, and cultural meanings that Korean American students attach to Korean food (Locher et al., 2005; Jung, 2015), and examine how those meanings shape their interpretations of campus food environments (Dhillon et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). I do not assume whether campus dining operates as a site of connection or disconnection. Instead, I investigate how students themselves evaluate these environments. I intend this work to inform future research and institutional practices related to campus dining, culturally responsive environments, and student belonging. I center Korean American students not as a population uniquely disadvantaged by campus dining, but as a specific community whose experiences offer a close, culturally grounded view of how institutional food environments shaped by white normative assumptions (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Morris, 2016; Goodwin, 2010) may or may not reflect the cultural practices through which students understand care and belonging (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012).

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this study and to examine how Korean American students interpret their food environments and the meanings they attach to Korean food, I organized this study around the following research questions:

1. How do students describe their food experiences within campus dining and local food environments?
2. What emotions, memories, and cultural meanings do they attach to Korean food?
3. How do these meanings inform their sense of belonging and care in higher education?

Together, these questions move from students' everyday food experiences to the meanings they attach to those experiences to the broader implications for belonging and care.

Significance of Study

This dissertation expands how belonging and student experience are conceptualized in higher education, particularly as they pertain to food environments and practices on campus. Research on belonging has traditionally emphasized academic engagement, peer relationships, and institutional climate, with limited attention to everyday practices such as eating (Strayhorn, 2012; Gopalan & Brady, 2020). By examining food as a culturally and relationally meaningful practice, I extend belonging research to include embodied and routine dimensions of student life (Museus, 2014), foregrounding food as a site through which students interpret care, recognition, and inclusion (Museus, 2014; Yosso, 2005). In doing so, I broaden theoretical understandings of how belonging is produced and negotiated in institutional contexts (Strayhorn, 2012; Museus et al., 2017).

This dissertation also contributes to Asian American higher education scholarship by illustrating how the disaggregation of broad racial categories can sharpen institutional critique rather than simply add a new subgroup to the literature (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012;

Tran, 2024). Because Korean American students are frequently subsumed under broader Asian American categories in both institutional data and scholarship (Teranishi et al., 2009; Becerra et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2023), centering their food experiences demonstrates what becomes visible when within-group diversity is taken seriously: not to elevate one community's needs above another's, but to show how white normative assumptions operate on groups that institutional data renders invisible (Morris, 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Lee, 2006). This focus responds to calls for more nuanced examinations of Asian American student life beyond academic outcomes and aggregate measures (Museus & Yi, 2017; Teranishi et al., 2009) and highlights food as an important yet overlooked dimension of how Korean American students navigate higher education environments (Tran, 2024).

Empirically, I document an underexamined aspect of student experience (Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Tran, 2024). Food is a routine and embodied part of daily life in college, yet students' cultural interpretations of food environments are rarely the subject of systematic inquiry (Wright et al., 2021; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). By examining how Korean American students describe their food experiences and the meanings they attach to Korean food, I provide empirical insight into how everyday institutional practices are experienced at the student level, capturing dimensions of campus life that are often treated as peripheral but may be central to how students understand comfort, familiarity, and belonging (Locher et al., 2005; Dhillon et al., 2019).

Practically, these findings have implications for campus dining services and broader institutional practices (Cleveland, 2023). Rather than viewing food solely through nutritional or operational lenses, institutions can draw on these findings to reflect on how food environments communicate inclusion or exclusion, how dining programs consider cultural

food offerings and menu design, and how food can function as a site of recognition and care (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Museus, 2014; Yano & Adams, 2013). In this way, food emerges as a meaningful component of institutional efforts to support student belonging and well-being (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012).

To situate this work within existing scholarship, the remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive review of the literature and conceptual frameworks grounding the study, including scholarship on food, culture, identity, belonging in higher education, and the theoretical lenses guiding the analysis. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology, including the individual student interviews and the gimhap chat group conversations, as well as participant recruitment, data collection procedures, and analytic strategies. Chapter 4 presents findings from the individual student interviews, supplemented by additional data sources that contextualize and deepen the analysis, including observations from visits to campus dining halls, the collection and review of dining menus and related artifacts, and interviews with the president of a Korean American student organization and representatives from the university's student wellness center. Chapter 5 presents findings from the gimhap chat conversations, including the methodological and theoretical contribution of using Suda as a relational approach to bringing community members together while generating knowledge. Chapter 6 offers an integrated discussion of findings across all data sources presented in Chapters 4 and 5, drawing together the study's theoretical contributions and implications for research, policy, and institutional practice. The dissertation concludes with reflections on limitations and directions for future research.

Together, these chapters build a layered account of how culturally meaningful food practices shape students' experiences of belonging, care, and recognition within higher education settings. In next chapter, I begin by situating this work in existing interdisciplinary scholarship, establishing the theoretical and empirical foundations necessary for interpreting students' food experiences as a central dimension of campus life and institutional culture.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Students who leave home to attend college often experience a drastic change in their food environment (Arcadu & Aleffi, 2024; Pan et al., 1999; Zhang, 2025). The dining hall replaces the family kitchen; the meal plan replaces the shared table; and the rotating institutional menu replaces the home food culture, whether that means home-cooked meals, family recipes passed down across generations, or the shared practice of dining out together. For some students, this transition may be more drastic than for others. What does it mean when the change a student experiences is not only a shift from eating at home to eating in a dining hall, but also a shift into a food environment that offers ingredients and cuisines they do not recognize and that do not reflect the foods they grew up eating? For Korean American students, for instance, what does it mean to grow up eating 밥 (bap/rice) and banchan (반찬/side dishes), and then enter an institutional food environment built on entirely different assumptions about what a student needs? What happens to a student's sense of belonging, comfort, and identity when the foods that have organized her experience of care are simply not there? These are the questions animating this chapter and this study, and as I will demonstrate through the review of literature that follows, they remain largely unanswered in the existing scholarship.

Though the specific question of how cultural food difference relates to Korean American students' sense of belonging on campus has not yet been examined in the literature, I situate this study within a broad and interdisciplinary body of scholarship to build the case for why those questions matter, what tools are available for examining them, and what analytical framework this study brings to the task. The scholarship reviewed here spans cultural anthropology, food studies, the history of institutional food in the United States,

higher education research on student belonging and campus environments, and critical race and feminist frameworks in education. The first cluster of literature, gathered under the heading "Setting the Table: Food, Culture, and Identity," establishes that food is a cultural practice, an emotional object, and a political formation, and situates Korean food specifically within Korean and Korean American life. The next cluster, "Campus Food Environments and Food Insecurity in Higher Education," documents what the existing higher education research on campus food has and has not examined, establishing the empirical gap this study addresses. The third cluster, "Belonging, Student Success, and the Critical Ground," reviews scholarship on student belonging and persistence, names White normativity as the structural force that produces the institutional gap this study investigates, and centers community cultural wealth as the framework through which students' food-related navigation strategies are understood. I will then close this chapter by detailing the conceptual framework driving the study's analysis, introducing the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model and Suda as the two primary lenses, explaining how they work together, and naming the specific theoretical contributions this study makes to each.

Taken together, the bodies of scholarship reviewed here establish three interlocking arguments that ground this study. First, food is not a neutral or purely biological matter; it is a culturally embedded, emotionally anchored, and politically charged practice through which people construct and maintain identity, community, and care. Second, institutional food environments in educational settings have historically been organized around the erasure of cultural food difference, and campus dining today continues that pattern. Third, students' sense of belonging in higher education is deeply shaped by whether their identities are recognized and affirmed by the institutional environments they inhabit, and campus dining,

though largely overlooked in belonging research, functions as a daily site where that recognition is either communicated or withheld. It is to the first of these arguments that I now turn.

Setting the Table: Food, Culture, and Identity

Before examining how campus food environments shape students' experiences, it is necessary to establish why food matters in the first place. Decades of scholarship across anthropology, sociology, cultural history, and food studies converge on a consistent argument: food is never only sustenance. It is a cultural practice (Kneafsey et al., 2021), a social institution (Lalli, 2021; Locher et al., 2005), an emotional object (Locher et al., 2005), and a political formation (Kneafsey et al., 2021; Slocum, 2011). This section reviews that body of scholarship across three interconnected dimensions: food as cultural practice and social meaning; Korean food as relational, moral, and diasporic practice; and the historical and ongoing use of institutional food to enforce cultural norms and hierarchies.

Food as Cultural Practice and Social Meaning. Scholarship in food studies and cultural anthropology has long argued that eating is simultaneously a biological act and a deeply social one, shaped by history, power, memory, and identity as much as by hunger. Nancy Chen (2009) frames this most directly, arguing that food functions as a "conveyor of culture" and as the primary medium through which people across the world experience healing at multiple levels. According to Chen, eating is a social practice with political implications, embedded in cultural frameworks that structure both everyday routines and important ritual moments. What, when, where, and with whom we eat are not simply logistical questions but cultural ones (Chen, 2009).

Kneafsey et al. (2021) extend this argument across scales, noting that food can take on sacred importance through religious festivals, represent national or local identities and landscapes, serve as a political weapon, or be imbued with what they call "commensality," meaning the joy and collectivity of shared meals, community festivals, and political activism. Food, they write, is strongly associated with both individual and cultural identities and experiences, and it can be a source of celebration or shame, a signal of belonging or a marker of difference. These plural and often simultaneous meanings make food a uniquely powerful lens for understanding how people navigate cultural identity in institutional contexts. When a student sees her family's food offered in a campus dining hall for the first time, the emotional complexity of that encounter, involving gratitude, recognition, possible disappointment, and possible pride, cannot be reduced to nutrition or logistics.

A commonly recurring theme in literature regarding food and culture is the concept of commensality, the practice of eating together. As Jönsson, Michaud, and Neuman (2021) show in their critical review of commensality research across disciplines, shared meals function simultaneously to create social cohesion and to draw lines of inclusion and exclusion. The physical settings in which eating occurs, including who sits where, what is offered, and what is conspicuously absent, are not neutral but participate in producing social categories and communicating institutional values. Gabaccia's (2010) historical account of ethnic food and American identity situates this dynamic in a longer historic frame, tracing how food has functioned across centuries of American life as a site of ethnic mingling, cultural contestation, and social reproduction. She documents how immigrant communities used food to exercise a measure of control during periods of profound instability and displacement; familiar foods were not merely preferred but structurally necessary,

maintaining continuity with community, family, religion, and a way of organizing the world. As Gabaccia writes, "to abandon immigrant food traditions for the foods of Americans was to abandon community, family, and religion, at least in the minds of many immigrants" (p. 54).

This argument about familiarity and continuity connects directly to scholarship on comfort food. Locher et al. (2005) argue that comfort foods function as psychological anchors, maintaining a continuity of the self in unfamiliar surroundings, and their empirical basis for this claim is drawn directly from undergraduate students. In their study of 264 undergraduates, no student identified a novel or unfamiliar food as a source of comfort, and only foods associated with memorable events or relationships in one's personal history qualified (Locher et al., 2005). When people are physically disconnected from the communities and primary groups that define who they are, whether through migration, relocation, or through going to college as Locher and colleagues specifically note, their sense of self can become fractured (Locher et al., 2005). Consuming food intimately linked with one's past, particularly foods associated with ethnic identity and family relationships, can repair that fracture. Locher and colleagues also emphasize that this function is relational rather than purely individual, as comfort food carries the presence of the people and places it came from even when consumed in physical solitude (Locher et al., 2005). Homesickness was among the most frequently documented triggers in their study, with students separated from their homelands specifically selecting ethnic foods for comfort (Locher et al., 2005).

Chen (2009) extends this understanding by situating comfort food within a broader framework of psychological and social meaning. Comfort food, Chen explains, "may represent ties to one's homeland or ancestral background, memories of childhood, or notions of belonging" (p. 74), which underscores that its significance lies in affective and social

connections rather than in nutritional qualities alone. Chen further argues that comfort food operates in terms of satiation rather than health and that its power is determined not by caloric content but by how soothing that food is at a particular moment for a particular person (Chen, 2009). What Chen calls "nostalgic gastronomy" shapes tastes and preferences that offer powerful links to one's social practices of eating (Chen, 2009, p. 75) and both the place and time of consumption are central to the meaning of satiation. Together, Locher and colleagues and Chen establish that the significance of culturally familiar food for students navigating new institutional environments is not incidental or sentimental but psychologically and socially constitutive, and that institutions rarely account for this dimension when designing their food environments (Chen, 2009; Locher et al., 2005).

Agaronov and colleagues (2019) further extend this framework into the institutional food context directly, documenting what happens when school food environments produce a persistent mismatch with students' home food cultures. In their study, students responded to that mismatch by skipping meals, seeking familiar food outside the institution, and accumulating what the authors call food culture mismatch, a condition in which the gap between institutional provision and cultural expectation compounds over time (Agaronov et al., 2019). The consequences of food culture mismatch extended beyond nutrition into students' sense of comfort, identity, and connection to their institutional environment. This pattern has a direct campus analogue that is examined in detail later in this literature review.

Kneafsey and colleagues (2021) note that the food geographies literature has been produced primarily by White scholars working within Western institutional frameworks, a critical observation that bears directly on how campus food systems are imagined and designed. Scholars of food geographies have shown that ideas about what people "need" to

eat, what counts as a balanced or appealing meal, and how variety is defined in institutional settings are shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts rather than being culturally neutral norms. Chen's argument that eating is a political act, one in which food choices carry implications about access, safety, and social justice (2009, p. 112), provides a conceptual ground for examining how campus dining spaces materialize unequal power relations around food. Together, this scholarship underscores that institutional food systems are embedded within broader racialized and classed structures, setting the stage for later analysis of how students experience these systems in practice.

Korean Food as Relational Practice. While the preceding section establishes that food is always culturally meaningful, literature reviewed in the next section asks what Korean food specifically means and why that meaning matters for understanding what Korean American students experience when they arrive at a campus dining hall that does not serve it. Korean food functions as a dense cultural system encoding identity, philosophy, and worldview, one in which relational practice, moral obligation, and cultural memory are all organized around what and how one eats (H. Jung, 2015; W.-C. Kim, 2012; Kittler et al., 2017).

According to Kim (2012), the organizing principle of the Korean food system is 밥 (bap/rice), the word for cooked rice that also functions as a synonym for a meal itself. Kim (2012) documents how bap carries a weight in Korean culture far exceeding its nutritional function: the word emerged from a history of scarcity in which rice was both sustenance and aspiration, and it retains that weight in contemporary Korean life. In the Korean section of the foundational textbook *Food and Culture*, Kittler et al. (2017) document that Korean meals are organized around bap and banchan, a shared arrangement of rice and side dishes that

reflects collectivist values shaped by centuries of Confucian social organization. The preparation of food, particularly by women in Korean households, is understood as an expression of affection, and a good appetite signals health and care received. Staple fermented foods such as 김치 (kimchi/fermented vegetables) and 된장 (doenjang/soy bean paste) carry deep cultural roots as health-promoting substances, and rice appears three times daily as part of the rhythm through which everyday life is organized and membership in a shared community is signaled. Jung (2015) deepens this account by analyzing Korean food as a cultural text with aesthetic-philosophical principles: the aesthetics of fermentation encode patience and slow transformation as cultural values, while the aesthetics of consideration are visible in dishes created specifically to care for elders and the vulnerable. Crucially, Jung identifies what the Korean word 식구 (shikgu/ family) makes visible: family are literally those who eat together, so eating is how community is constituted, not merely where it gathers. Across both accounts, the philosophical orientation of Korean food prioritizes relational harmony and ethical care over material abundance, a value system that makes food preparation and consumption inseparable from how responsibility toward others is expressed and received.

Korean food in the diaspora carries additional layers of meaning that complicate any simple account of cultural continuity. Because Korean-specific higher education research on food identity remains limited, I draw on adjacent scholarship about how food mediates cultural identity in diasporic and multiracial contexts, scholarship that illuminates dynamics relevant to Korean American students even when they were not its primary focus. Cleveland et al (2024) explored how mixed-race individuals use food to negotiate multiple heritage identities, finding that food serves as both a medium through which identity is performed and

a site at which its authenticity is tested. Participants described a heightened awareness of what counts as authentic versus what constitutes cultural approximation or misrepresentation, a sensitivity that sharpens when familiar cultural foods are served incorrectly or carelessly in institutional settings. Though Cleveland and colleagues studied mixed-race individuals rather than Korean American students specifically, the dynamic they document, in which inauthentic institutional food produces misrecognition rather than recognition, is directly relevant to what this study investigates.

Locher and colleagues (2005) document that people consume familiar foods in moments of distress precisely because unfamiliar foods cannot fulfill the same function, noting that new foods tend to evoke feelings of anxiety rather than comfort (p. 291). The comfort Korean food provides is specific, embodied, and relational in the ways the preceding section has established: tied to the relational grammar of *bap* and *banchan*, to the aesthetics of consideration Jung (2015) identifies in Korean food preparation, and to the broader argument that comfort food carries the presence of the people and places it came from even when consumed alone (Locher et al., 2005).

The diasporic dimension of Korean American students' food experiences also involves what Gabaccia (2010) identifies as the complexity of immigrant food identity: the simultaneous pull toward familiar foods and the pressure, often internal as well as external, to assimilate. Ruis (2017) observes in his historical analysis that some immigrant children rejected foods that marked them as foreign, choosing assimilation over cultural continuity, while others clung to familiar foods as anchors precisely because those foods preserved what assimilation threatened to dissolve. Both responses represent ways of navigating an institutional food environment that does not see them, a pattern with direct relevance to the

campus food experiences this dissertation examines. How Korean American students navigate that environment, and what it costs them, remains largely unanswered in the existing literature, and it is precisely that question this study is designed to address.

Institutional Food as Cultural Politics: The Historical Record. The argument that institutional food environments carry cultural meaning and political consequence is documented across more than a century of American educational history. From the home economics movement of the early twentieth century through the establishment of the National School Lunch Program in 1946 and into the contemporary politics of campus dining, institutional food in the United States has been organized around questions of whose culture counts, who is expected to assimilate, and what kind of citizen eating is meant to produce. Levine (2010) traces the origins of school lunch in the United States to the intersection of nutrition science, Americanization ideology, and social control, documenting how early lunch programs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were designed at least in part to transform immigrant children rather than simply to feed them. Home economists and school reformers understood school meals as a vehicle for assimilating immigrant children into Anglo-American culture and dietary norms; Mexican-American women were told to forsake chilis and tomatoes, and the ubiquitous white sauce of the era was, in Laura Shapiro's phrase, a desire to transform ethnic differences into a homogenous perfection salad (as cited in Levine, 2010, p. 25). The science of nutrition was deployed not to nourish diverse bodies but to normalize a particular cultural background, as the institutional standard.

Ruis (2017) provides detailed accounts of early school lunch programs in New York City and Chicago that took a different approach, succeeding precisely because they took the

cultural food practices of immigrant students seriously. The School Lunch Committee in New York City employed Italian cooks for schools with predominantly Italian student bodies, Irish cooks for Irish schools, and Jewish cooks for schools in Jewish neighborhoods, with periodic inspections by a rabbi to verify kosher compliance, and the menus reflected the actual food cultures of the children being served. Ruis documents that when the Board of Education subsequently took over and replaced these culturally responsive menus with a standardized, bland American menu, participation dropped, with some children rejecting American foods in favor of more familiar ones and others rejecting foods that marked them as foreign and choosing assimilation. Both responses, as Ruis (2017) observes, were acts of navigating an institutional food environment that no longer saw them. He notes that "food was both a significant form of rebellion, eating that which is forbidden is a powerful way to reject tradition, and an equally significant cultural anchor, identifying the consumer with a particular religion, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic status" (p. 82).

Levine's (2010) account of Margaret Mead's work for the Committee on Food Habits during World War II illuminates the ideological underpinnings of this approach. Mead's solution to the challenge of feeding a diverse nation was to eliminate as much distinctive flavoring as possible, recommending only salt so as not to alienate one group or another, and the institutional food she envisioned was food with deliberately low emotional value, stripped of the cultural specificity that makes food meaningful. Weaver-Hightower (2022) brings this historical analysis into the present, arguing that school and campus food environments always teach, whether or not that is their intention, and that students learn from institutional food not only about nutrition but about their own value and the value of others from what institutions do or do not serve. Schaeffer (2021) offers a resonant contemporary

example, describing a school that was only 18 percent white but where everyone was eating white food, and documenting children choosing not to eat rather than bring food from home that would mark them as different.

Yano and Adams (2013) provide a counterexample in their study of school lunch in postwar Hawaii, documenting how the integration of rice as a daily institutional staple, present as a reliable and ordinary part of every meal rather than as a cultural novelty or a themed event, created what they call culinary citizenship: a sense of belonging produced through the shared daily experience of eating food that reflected students' actual cultural lives. Belonging through food, as this study suggests, is produced by routine availability rather than by occasional gestures toward cultural diversity. Taken together, this historical and contemporary record establishes that institutional food environments are never culturally neutral, that they always reflect decisions about whose food practices are default and whose are accommodation, and that when institutions have chosen cultural responsiveness in their food programs, the results are documented: students eat, participation increases, and students experience recognition by the institution.

Campus Food Environments and Food Insecurity in Higher Education

Research on college student food has grown substantially over the past two decades, producing a body of literature organized primarily around nutrition, cost, and food insecurity. Scholarship has documented that campus food environments tend to prioritize institutional efficiency over student welfare, that food insecurity among college students is pervasive and structurally produced, and that both conditions fall unevenly across lines of race, class, generation, and housing status (X. Li et al., 2022; Nazmi et al., 2019; Peterson & Freidus, 2023). Cultural adequacy, meaning whether campus food environments reflect the food

identities of the students they serve, has received comparatively little attention, and the scholarship that does address it has not been applied to Korean American students specifically.

What Campus Food Environments Look Like. Li et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive synthesis of campus food environment research through a systematic review of eleven studies examining how university food environments influence student dietary behaviors. Taste is the most important factor for students when choosing food, followed by price and availability (X. Li et al., 2022). Campus food environments tend to be structured in ways that promote unhealthy choices because unhealthy food is more accessible, more affordable, and more consistently available than healthy food (Li et al., 2022). Students who live on campus under mandatory meal plans inhabit the campus food environment as their primary food system for much of the year, making its composition consequential beyond matters of individual preference (Li et al., 2022). Tseng et al. (2016), in a direct assessment of one California university campus using validated nutritional environment measures, found that only 12% of entrées available at campus dining venues qualified as healthful and only 36% of main dish salads met the same standard. The nutritional framework guiding such assessments measures whether food is adequate for student bodies; it does not measure whether the food on offer reflects students' cultural identities or food practices (Tseng et al., 2016).

Cleveland (2023), drawing on a narrative review of campus food environment literature, argues that public higher education institutions have allowed campus food systems to be reorganized around revenue generation rather than public health, equity, or sustainability through the adoption of neoliberal policies. Campus dining is increasingly

operated by large private contractors whose institutional incentive is to maximize profit from captive student populations (Cleveland, 2023). Cleveland (2023) calls for a reorientation of campus food systems toward equitable, healthy, and environmentally sustainable food environments structured as genuine institutional commitments rather than auxiliary enterprises. When campus food systems are designed primarily to generate revenue from a presumed mainstream consumer, students whose cultural food needs fall outside that mainstream bear an unequal institutional burden, paying the same mandatory fees for a system that does not serve them equivalently (Cleveland, 2023).

Cleveland's (2023) critique of revenue-driven campus food systems is complemented by scholarship that examines how the cultural composition of those systems communicates institutional values. Weaver-Hightower (2022), in a book synthesizing nearly fifteen years of research on school food politics in the United States and internationally, argues that school food has been characterized by conservative resistance to food provision and regulation in tension with progressive incrementalism toward healthier and more accessible food, and that both forces have prevented major structural reform. Central to this analysis is the concept of the *foodscape*, defined as the totality of places and spaces where food is acquired, prepared, discussed, and experienced in a given environment (Weaver-Hightower, 2022, p. 69). The campus *foodscape* encompasses dining halls, food courts, vending machines, campus stores, food trucks, and the informal food economies that develop among students (Weaver-Hightower, 2022). Weaver-Hightower (2022) argues that *foodscapes* communicate: the arrangement of what is centrally available, what is peripheral, and what appears only for special occasions transmits messages about whose culture is considered normal and whose is treated as exceptional. He frames this as a question, asking “What do immigrant children

learn about their value when the menu rarely or never includes their cultural foods, like Indian food or kosher and halal foods?” (Weaver-Hightower, 2022, p. 70). Weaver-Hightower further emphasizes the scale of this exclusion by citing that only 1.9 percent of U.S. school districts serve kosher or halal items, a figure that reflects the structural invisibility of non-dominant food cultures in educational institutions broadly (Weaver-Hightower, 2022, p. 70).

Dhillon et al. (2019) document the experiential consequences of foodscapes that fail to reflect students' cultural food backgrounds. Their qualitative study of twenty-one first-year minority students at a university in a food desert found that food familiarity operated alongside cost and variety as a significant barrier to campus food satisfaction (Dhillon et al., 2019). Students expressed a desire for foods resembling what they ate at home not merely because those foods were preferred but because their familiarity carried a sense of continuity and belonging (Dhillon et al., 2019). When those foods were unavailable, students experienced the dining environment as alienating rather than simply unsatisfying (Dhillon et al., 2019). Agaronov et al. (2019) provide a framework for naming this dynamic through their grounded theory study of Black and Latino adolescents navigating school food environments. They define food culture mismatch as the experience of feeling underrepresented at school where food and food-related practices do not match cultural food norms at home (Agaronov et al., 2019). Mismatch operated under two conditions in their data: sensory-emotional, encompassing taste, quality, trust, and nostalgia, and sociopolitical, encompassing rules, food actors, and autonomy (Agaronov et al., 2019). The behavioral consequences included skipping or wasting school lunch entrées and seeking out familiar

foods elsewhere, often trading nutritional quality for cultural recognition (Agaronov et al., 2019).

What these institutional critiques and student experiences share is a common implication that the existing research has been slow to name directly. Watson et al. (2017), in focus groups with eighty-two students at UCLA, found that students understood food access as a basic needs concern connected to academic functioning, social belonging, and full participation in educational life, not a purely nutritional or economic matter. Martinez et al. (2021), in a qualitative study at multiple University of California campuses, found that students defined basic needs as encompassing mental health, sleep, hygiene, and transportation alongside food, with each dimension shaping their capacity to show up in university life. When reviewed alongside Weaver-Hightower's foodscape framework and Agaronov and colleagues' concept of food culture mismatch, these findings suggest that when students lack access to culturally familiar food, the consequences extend well beyond dietary dissatisfaction. The campus food environment becomes a daily site where students' sense of belonging, self-continuity, and institutional recognition are either supported or undermined. That the existing research frames this problem primarily in nutritional and economic terms, while students themselves frame it in terms of belonging and basic human needs, is precisely the empirical gap this study is designed to address.

Food Insecurity in Higher Education. Food insecurity among college students is substantially higher than in the general population and has documented consequences for academic performance and persistence (Nazmi et al., 2019). Nazmi and colleagues (2019), in a systematic review of eight studies representing 52,085 students across twenty-seven states, found a weighted prevalence of food insecurity of 50.9%, more than three times the national

average for the general adult population at the time. Food insecurity was higher at community colleges than at four-year institutions and was associated with lower GPA and financial instability across a wide range of institutional and demographic contexts. Existing responses, primarily emergency measures such as campus food pantries, address the immediate symptom without touching the structural conditions that produce it (Nazmi et al., 2019).

Martinez et al. (2018) document these structural conditions in detail for students at the University of California system, where forty percent of students reported food insecurity in the past year. The strongest predictor of current food insecurity was a history of childhood food insecurity, with an odds ratio of 7.4, indicating that campus food insecurity is better understood as the continuation of a life course trajectory shaped by structural inequality than as a campus-specific problem. Maroto et al. (2015) found that African American students at two Maryland community colleges experienced food insecurity at nearly double the rate of white students, and Camelo and Elliott (2019), in a study of 3,245 students at a public university, found that food insecurity partially mediated the relationship between race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and GPA. Black, Hispanic, Pell Grant-eligible, and first-generation students were not only more likely to experience food insecurity but their insecurity functioned as a pathway through which structural disadvantage translated into academic outcomes. Tanner et al. (2023) found that Latino and Latina students at UC Davis were twice as likely as white students to experience food insecurity, while transfer students were eighty-four percent more likely to be food insecure than non-transfer students but thirty-nine percent less likely to access campus food resources, a gap attributed to stigma and inadequate awareness of available services. Esaryk et al. (2021) found that first-generation

students and Filipino and Pacific Islander students were among the most frequent users of campus food pantries, reflecting both higher rates of food insecurity and greater willingness to access institutional support.

Peterson and Freidus (2023) argue that university student food insecurity constitutes a form of structural violence: a condition produced not by individual failure but by institutional arrangements that systematically harm particular populations while maintaining the appearance of neutrality. Their study found that students internalize blame for their food insecurity because universities frame their responses around individual-level interventions rather than addressing the underlying conditions of inadequate financial aid, housing instability, and mandatory meal plan costs that produce insecurity in the first place. The structural violence framework extends further when the cultural dimensions of food assistance are examined. Klobodu and colleagues (2021), in a qualitative study of DACA-eligible college students, found that cultural difference operated as a distinct barrier to food access even when food was technically available. One participant, describing her experience with the campus food pantry, explained that she wanted to stick to what comforts her and eat what she likes, and that encountering unfamiliar ingredients at the pantry required a kind of cultural open-mindedness that felt like an additional burden rather than a solution (Klobodu et al., 2021, p. 672). The authors frame this as a unique barrier compounding food insecurity: institutional food assistance, like institutional dining, is designed around an assumed mainstream consumer, and students whose cultural food practices fall outside that assumption find that access and adequacy are not the same thing.

The structural violence framework becomes even more generative when extended beyond caloric adequacy to the cultural dimensions of food access. Wright and colleagues

(2021), in a qualitative study of sixteen second-generation American minority college students, found that cultural food insecurity, defined as the inability to access, prepare, share, and consume cultural foods, produced depression, anxiety, loneliness, and identity erosion among students who were otherwise materially fed. Students described being forced to adapt to American campus food as an unwanted change to their cultural identity, and several described the inability to access cultural foods as a felt sense that a significant part of themselves was missing. Wright and colleagues' concept of cultural food insecurity is significant for this study because it names a form of institutional food failure that the conventional food insecurity literature cannot capture: students can be physically fed and culturally starved at the same time. Similarly, undergraduate students at a university that requires a meal plan to be included in room and board, such as the case for Uri University, are not food insecure in the conventional sense. However, what the existing literature has not yet examined is what it means for students whose cultural food practices are structurally absent from those dining halls, how students interpret that absence, what it costs them emotionally and physically, and what they create in response.

The Empirical Gap This Study Addresses. Despite this substantial body of research, scholars working in campus food have organized their inquiries almost entirely around material and physiological frameworks, asking whether students have enough food, whether that food is nutritious, whether they can afford it, and whether institutional structures are producing or alleviating material deprivation. Whether campus food environments reflect the cultural identities of the students they serve, and whether the absence of culturally familiar food shapes how students experience belonging and institutional recognition, has received comparatively little attention. Weaver-Hightower (2011) identified this gap more than a

decade ago in an essay urging education researchers to take school food seriously as a site of scholarly inquiry, arguing that food had been left almost entirely to scholars outside education, primarily historians, public health researchers, and nutritionists, producing a body of literature that documented food's material dimensions while neglecting its educational, social, and cultural significance. This study is a direct response to that call.

The gap is compounded by a second problem in the existing literature: the systematic aggregation of Asian American students into a single category that obscures meaningful differences across origin groups. Becerra et al. (2018), in a study of food insecurity prevalence among disaggregated Asian American subgroups in California, argue that aggregating Asian American data into a single category masks true disparities among subpopulations and attributes low rates of measured need to a demographic whose internal diversity makes any summary statistic misleading. Vu et al. (2023) extend this argument using California Health Interview Survey data spanning a decade, finding that food insecurity prevalence among low-income Korean adults in California was 25%, with CalFresh participation among Korean adults at just 11.2%, the second lowest of all Asian origin groups examined. The authors identify cultural stigma, complicated application processes, and insufficient outreach as likely barriers to program uptake. Becerra et al. (2018) further found that for Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese subgroups specifically, low acculturation was a significant predictor of food insecurity, meaning that the students most culturally distant from mainstream institutional environments were also the most materially vulnerable. These studies were conducted with general adult populations rather than college students, but their implications for the higher education context are direct: the model minority myth, which both studies name explicitly as a driver of research and policy neglect, operates in campus food

systems just as it operates in public health data. The assumption that Asian American students do not face food-related challenges is not only empirically incorrect; it is a structural condition that reduces institutional attention and allows campus food environments to remain organized around other priorities.

Korean American students in particular are rarely the focus of disaggregated higher education research (Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012; Tran, 2024), despite their substantial presence within Asian American enrollments at selective four-year institutions in California (Karthick, 2025). When Korean American students appear in the literature, they tend to be subsumed under the broad Asian American category, which flattens diversity in cultural background, immigration history, generational status, and campus experience (Museus et al., 2017). The model minority myth further narrows the institutional attention directed toward Asian American students by positioning them as self-sufficient and academically well-adjusted, reducing the perceived need for targeted support (Museus et al., 2017; Tran, 2024).

The scholarship that most directly anticipates this study's concerns does so from adjacent rather than identical vantage points. Buell et al. (2021), in a qualitative case study of first-year international students at a predominantly White institution, found that dissatisfaction with campus food was nearly universal, grounded in cultural as well as gustatory dimensions, and that the absence of familiar food contributed directly to homesickness and a diminished sense of belonging. Students described eating on campus as something done to stay alive rather than as a meaningful or satisfying experience, and the gap between campus food and home food was experienced as a loss of connection rather than merely a loss of preference. Wright et al. (2021) extend this picture through their focus on second-generation American minority students, finding that cultural food security was

directly tied to identity maintenance and well-being, and that structural barriers including the unavailability of cultural ingredients, high costs, and the time burden of sourcing culturally specific foods made regular foodways practice difficult on a student budget. Together, these studies establish that cultural food insecurity among college students has measurable consequences for identity, mental health, and belonging. What they do not yet provide is a sustained examination of any specific ethnic student population's experience within the campus food environments they are institutionally required to use.

This dissertation addresses that gap directly. Korean American undergraduate students at residential universities are not, by conventional measures, food insecure: they have meal plans and physical access to dining halls. What the existing literature has not examined is what it means for students whose cultural food practices are structurally absent from those dining halls, how students interpret that absence, what it costs them emotionally and physically, and what they create in response. Answering these questions requires first establishing why belonging matters for student persistence and success, naming the structural force that produces the institutional gap this study investigates, and centering the cultural assets students draw upon as they navigate that gap. I turn next to the literature that situates this study within that broader conversation.

Belonging, Student Success, and the Critical Ground

Three bodies of scholarship provide the critical ground on which this study's analytical framework stands. The first establishes belonging as foundational to student persistence and well-being, and documents how campus environments produce or impede it for students of color. The second addresses the structural force that produces unequal campus environments: the unmarked centering of White and Western cultural norms as the

institutional default. The third reorients the analysis away from student deficits and toward student assets, drawing on community cultural wealth, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and funds of knowledge to position what students know and practice around food as culturally developed knowledge that institutions systematically fail to recognize. The first of these begins with the question of belonging itself.

Sense of Belonging and Student Persistence. Belonging, in the higher education literature, refers to students' perceived sense of social support, connection, and acceptance within their campus communities (Strayhorn, 2012, 2014). Strayhorn (2012) frames belonging as a dynamic need that fluctuates in response to institutional conditions, social experiences, and personal circumstances rather than a fixed state students either possess or lack. His framework positions belonging as particularly critical during moments of stress, vulnerability, and transition, arguing that the need for belonging intensifies precisely when students are uncertain, homesick, academically overwhelmed, or socially isolated. Strayhorn (2012) also establishes that belonging is not equally available across student populations: students from groups whose identities are less reflected in institutional culture face greater difficulty developing and sustaining it, and this differential is consequential because belonging is associated with persistence, academic engagement, and mental health outcomes across multiple studies (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012, 2014).

Strayhorn's framework has been enormously productive in higher education research, but scholars have also noted its limitations. Because belonging is defined primarily as a psychological perception, the framework can place explanatory weight on how students feel rather than on the institutional conditions that produce or withhold belonging in the first place. Choi et al. (2021), in a study of 553 Asian American students at a predominantly white

Midwestern university, found that a strong sense of belonging helped to a certain extent but was not sufficient to fully mitigate the negative effects of experiencing racism. The researchers concluded that the persistent experience of racism and othering can undermine Asian American students' sense of identity and mental health regardless of belonging levels, suggesting that belonging as a psychological construct cannot fully account for what structural conditions do to students. Samura (2016) points toward a structural corrective, finding that Asian American students experienced stronger belonging when they were able to influence or reshape their academic and social environments, a condition that depends on institutional design rather than individual perception. Together, these critiques suggest that belonging is not only something students feel but something institutions produce, and that a framework capable of holding institutions accountable for that production is necessary.

Gopalan and Brady (2020), using data from a nationally representative longitudinal survey of first-year students, found that belonging was positively associated with persistence, use of campus services, and mental health outcomes, but that underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students and first-generation students reported significantly lower belonging than their continuing-generation and white peers at four-year institutions. This gap was not explained by academic preparation or engagement but by features of the campus environment itself. Johnson et al. (2007), examining belonging among first-year students from different racial and ethnic groups, found that white and Caucasian students reported the strongest sense of belonging while Asian Pacific American students were among those reporting weaker belonging, and that positive perceptions of the campus racial climate were a significant predictor of belonging for all groups. Socially supportive environments in residence halls mattered independently of academic preparation, indicating that what students

encountered in the informal, daily spaces of campus life was a meaningful predictor of whether they felt they belonged there.

Kuh et al. (2000) offer a framework that makes the mechanisms of this dynamic legible. Students whose cultures of origin differ significantly from the dominant campus culture face greater challenges in persisting, not because they are less capable but because they must navigate a gap between the world they carry inside them and the world the institution presents as normal. Students who traverse a large cultural distance, Kuh and colleagues argue, must either acclimate to the dominant campus culture, find or create cultural enclaves where their own meaning-making is affirmed, or leave. For Korean American students at a residential university, the campus dining hall represents one of the most routine sites of that cultural distance, a space encountered multiple times daily where the institution's assumptions about who students are and what they need are communicated through what is and is not on the menu. The belonging literature establishes what is at stake when that communication fails. What it does not yet provide is a framework that holds the institution accountable for the conditions it creates, a gap that the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model, introduced in the conceptual framework section, is designed to address.

White Normativity and the Structural Production of Cultural Exclusion.

Scholarship on White normativity in higher education addresses the structural mechanisms that produce the unequal belonging outcomes documented in the previous section. Morris (2016) argues that whiteness functions as a neutral or standard baseline in U.S. institutional life, so that white people are viewed simply as people while members of other racial groups are perceived as people only to the extent that they resemble white people. This normativity

is maintained through transparency: because whiteness is the default, those who occupy it frequently do not perceive their own experiences as racialized, which allows it to maintain its central position even as institutional demographics change. Harper (2012) extends this analysis to higher education specifically, finding in a review of ten years of scholarship in top-tier higher education journals that researchers consistently report racial disparities while rarely using the word racism to explain why those disparities exist. Harper argues that this reflects a narrow conception of racism as individual prejudice rather than as the institutional norms and structures that systematically disadvantage students of color, and that terminological avoidance protects institutions from accountability for the patterns their own data reveal. Gillborn (2005) similarly argues that white supremacy should be understood not only as the actions of extremist groups but as the taken-for-granted routine privileging of white interests within the political and educational mainstream, and that the consistent pattern of racial advantage for white students in educational systems represents a form of tacit intentionality even when policy-makers do not explicitly plan for racially disparate outcomes.

Applied to institutional food environments, White normativity operates through exactly the mechanisms Morris, Harper, and Gillborn describe: not through explicit exclusion but through the transparent assumption that the mainstream consumer the dining hall is designed to serve is culturally unmarked. Goodwin (2010) argues that curriculum functions not merely as subject matter but as a depository of national and cultural values used to acculturate students into a mainstream that is often synonymous with whiteness, and that Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are frequently perceived as perpetual others because the national mindset equates being American with being white, a pattern rooted in historical

legislation such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. What Goodwin argues about curriculum applies with equal force to institutional food environments: the daily organization of menus around a presumed mainstream communicates whose cultural practices the institution treats as ordinary and whose it treats as supplementary or foreign. The historical record reviewed earlier in this chapter, including the Americanization logic of early school lunch, the assimilatory function of institutional food, and the documented success of programs that incorporated students' actual food cultures, establishes that this pattern is not accidental but inherited. White normativity in campus dining is the contemporary form of an institutional logic with more than a century of precedent.

For Asian American students, including Korean American students, the model minority myth is a critical mechanism through which White normativity operates in higher education. Poon et al. (2016), in a critical review of 112 research works on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in higher education, argue that the model minority myth functions as a tool of racial wedge politics, used historically to undercut claims of systemic racism made by other minoritized groups and to validate color-blind and meritocratic ideologies that support the institutional status quo. Teranishi et al. (2009) similarly argue that the model minority stereotype acts as a conceptual blockage, creating a false narrative of universal AAPI success that masks the significant educational needs and diverse experiences within the AAPI community and leads institutions to exclude AAPI students from equity agendas and policy discussions. Lee (2006) introduces the concept of de-minoritization to describe the process by which Asian Americans are removed from the minority category in policy and public discourse because they are perceived as over-represented in prestigious universities, with the consequence that support services, specialized counseling, and financial aid are withdrawn

from AAPI subgroups that may still face significant socioeconomic barriers. Koshy (2001) adds a further dimension, arguing that Asian Americans are not simply outside whiteness but are produced by whiteness frameworks, meaning their social status is shaped by how they serve the interests of the dominant group, with the success of some Asian Americans used to justify the retrenchment of social services and the continued marginalization of other groups.

When institutions design food systems around a presumed mainstream consumer without examining whose culture that mainstream reflects, they enact the same assumption the model minority myth produces: that Asian American students are fine, that their needs are met, and that no specific accommodation is required (Weaver-Hightower, 2022; Goodwin, 2010; Poon et al., 2016; Teranishi et al., 2009). As the scholarship reviewed in this section establishes, White normativity maintains its central position precisely because it presents itself as the neutral default rather than as a cultural choice (Morris, 2016) and the model minority myth functions to render that assumption invisible by positioning Asian American students as already served (Poon et al., 2016; Teranishi et al., 2009; Lee, 2006). The next section turns to the cultural assets students bring to navigating institutional environments organized around this logic.

The Wealth of Knowledge and Resources that Students Bring. The scholarship reviewed in the preceding two subsections approaches campus environments primarily through the lens of what students lack or what institutions fail to provide. A complementary body of scholarship reorients this analysis by attending to what students bring. Yosso (2005), drawing on Critical Race Theory, challenges the Bourdieusian conception of cultural capital that has organized deficit thinking about students of color in higher education. In the dominant model, cultural capital is defined by proximity to white, middle-class institutional

norms, so that students who arrive at college with the linguistic patterns, social networks, and cultural knowledge institutions recognize and reward have capital while those who do not are treated as deficient (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) argues that this framework mistakes a particular cultural standard for a universal one, and that communities of color carry extensive and sophisticated cultural knowledge that constitutes wealth rather than deficit. She identifies six forms of capital, aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant, each representing a resource communities of color develop and mobilize in navigating institutions that were not designed for them (Yosso, 2005).

According to Yosso (2005), Familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledge and community history transmitted through family and kinship networks, including values, practices, and wisdom passed down through everyday care. Navigational capital refers to the skills developed to maneuver through institutions not designed for one's community, including the cognitive and emotional labor required to locate culturally familiar resources that the institution does not provide (Yosso, 2005). Resistant capital names the capacity to challenge unequal institutional arrangements through individual decisions and collective action (Yosso, 2005). Social capital encompasses the networks of people and community resources that provide support, information, and solidarity, including the peer networks through which students share knowledge about how to meet needs the institution does not address (Yosso, 2005). Each of these forms of capital is relevant to how students of color navigate campus food environments in which their cultural food practices are not institutionally reflected.

Community cultural wealth describes what students carry into institutions that do not recognize it, but it does not specify what those institutions should do differently. Ladson-

Billings (1995, 2014) developed culturally relevant pedagogy through a study of teachers who sustained academic success among African American students by building on rather than displacing students' cultural identities. The framework centers three tenets: academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness, establishing that cultural affirmation is a condition for rigorous education rather than a supplement to it. Paris (2012) proposed culturally sustaining pedagogy as an evolution of this framework, arguing that relevance, meeting students where they are, is insufficient without a commitment to sustenance: actively keeping students' cultural practices alive, dynamic, and valued across time. In a 2014 reflection on the uses and misuses of her original framework, Ladson-Billings acknowledged that culturally relevant pedagogy had frequently been applied through static rather than dynamic understandings of culture, and she endorsed Paris's extension as a necessary corrective, arguing that culture is always changing and that pedagogy must be responsive to that change (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Paris and Alim (2014) and Alim et al. (2020) developed the framework further, insisting that culturally sustaining practice must engage with the evolving nature of students' cultural identities and refuse tokenizing logics that reduce living cultures to fixed representations.

Moll et al. (1992) contribute a further dimension through the concept of funds of knowledge, defined as the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skill that households and communities carry and transmit across generations (Moll et al., 1992). Their research in working-class Mexican American households found that families possessed extensive knowledge in domains including agriculture, construction, medicine, and cooking that schools consistently failed to recognize or integrate because it did not fit institutional definitions of what counted as educational (Moll et al., 1992). The funds

of knowledge framework draws analytical attention to culturally developed knowledge that students bring to institutional settings and that those institutions have no mechanism for acknowledging. Tuck and Yang (2013) complement this orientation through their critique of damage-centered research, the mode of scholarship that documents harm to marginalized communities without attending to their complexity, sovereignty, and aspiration (Tuck & Yang, 2013). They argue that desire-based research, which attends to what communities are building and dreaming alongside what they are surviving, produces more complete and ethically accountable accounts of communities' relationships to institutions (Tuck & Yang, 2013). Love (2019) extends this orientation into educational practice, arguing that institutions must move beyond simply not harming students toward the active cultivation of joy, belonging, and full participation.

The bodies of literature reviewed in this section collectively insist that understanding what students of color experience in institutional settings requires attending to both what institutions fail to provide and what students build in response. The conceptual frameworks introduced in the next section, Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model and Suda, are built on this critical ground and oriented toward both dimensions of the problem it defines.

The Conceptual Framework

The scholarly ground assembled across the preceding sections of this chapter, covering food as cultural practice and political formation, the organization of campus food environments, the structural production of cultural exclusion, and the cultural wealth students carry in the face of institutional indifference, converges in a conceptual framework organized around two primary theoretical frameworks. The first is the Culturally Engaging Campus

Environments model (Museus et al., 2014, 2017), which provides a vocabulary for examining how institutional environments do or fail to produce the conditions for student belonging and success. The second is Suda (수다), a Korean cultural practice of relational conversation theorized by Meacham et al. (2022) as both a theoretical lens for understanding how knowledge is built through communal talk and a methodological orientation for how research knowledge can be gathered and co-produced. Community cultural wealth and its related critical frameworks, reviewed in the Belonging, Student Success, and the Critical Ground section, provide the epistemological ground beneath both.

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model, developed by Museus (2013, 2014) and empirically extended by Museus et al. (2017), provides the primary institutional lens for this study. Museus (2013, 2014) designed the framework to address a persistent gap in the student success literature: existing models of college persistence tended to focus on student-level variables, including pre-college preparation, academic engagement, and social integration, while treating the campus environment as a background condition rather than an active determinant of student outcomes. Museus (2014) argues that the campus environment itself, specifically the degree to which it reflects and engages the cultural backgrounds of students, is a primary driver of whether students persist and thrive. The model posits that the degree to which culturally engaging campus environments exist at a postsecondary institution is positively associated with more positive individual factors and ultimately greater college student success (Museus, 2013, 2014).

The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model identifies nine indicators organized around two broad dimensions (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). The first

dimension is cultural relevance, which encompasses the extent to which the campus environment reflects and validates students' cultural backgrounds. Its indicators include cultural familiarity, defined as the extent to which college students have opportunities to connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their backgrounds and experiences; culturally relevant knowledge, the degree to which students have opportunities to learn and exchange knowledge about their own cultural communities; cultural community service, opportunities to give back to and positively transform their communities; meaningful cross-cultural engagement, students' participation in discussions about real social and political problems with peers from diverse backgrounds; and culturally validating environments, the extent to which students feel their cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities are valued by their campuses (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). The second dimension is cultural responsiveness, which encompasses the extent to which campus programs and practices effectively respond to the needs of culturally diverse students. Its indicators include collectivist cultural orientations, the extent to which campuses are characterized by values of teamwork and mutual success rather than individualism and competition; humanized educational environments, settings in which institutional agents care about, are committed to, and develop meaningful relationships with students; proactive philosophies, which drive institutional agents to go beyond making support available to actively ensuring students have access to it; and holistic support, the extent to which students have access to at least one faculty or staff member they trust to provide or connect them to whatever information and support they need (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017).

Museus et al. (2017), using survey data from 870 students at an urban public research university, found that culturally engaging campus environments explained 68% of the

variation in sense of belonging, a substantially larger proportion than previously examined models (Museus et al., 2017). All nine indicators were positively correlated with belonging, and five were statistically significant predictors when controlling for other factors: cultural familiarity, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, proactive philosophies, and holistic support (Museus et al., 2017). Museus et al. (2017) found that culturally engaging environments predicted belonging for both White students and students of color, but that the specific indicators differed by group, with holistic support, cultural familiarity, and collectivist cultural orientations emerging as the strongest predictors for students of color. Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) illustrate what institutional investment in cultural familiarity looks like in practice through a case study of a Hispanic-Serving Institution where Chicana/o Studies and the Educational Opportunity Program had been genuinely institutionalized; students in their study described a sense that the institution knew who they were and had built structures that took their cultural identities seriously (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015).

Campus dining is not named as an explicit domain of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model, and the framework attends primarily to academic and social environments including courses, advising, faculty relationships, and peer communities (Museus, 2014). The framework does not yet account for the daily, embodied, and repeated institutional encounter of eating. This study extends the framework's application to the campus food environment on the grounds that, if cultural familiarity and cultural validation are among the strongest predictors of belonging for students of color, and if the campus dining hall is among the most routine and unavoidable institutional spaces in a residential student's daily life, then the dining hall constitutes a site of cultural engagement or its absence by the model's own logic (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017).

Suda as Theoretical Lens and Methodological Orientation. The second primary framework is Suda (수다), theorized by Meacham et al. (2022) as a Korean cultural practice of conversation that is distinct from small talk or chitchat as commonly understood in English-language contexts. The literal translation of 수다/suda as extensive chatting is, as Meacham et al. (2022) note, both impractical and insufficient: Suda involves a significant length of time in which several stories can be exchanged in depth between participants, is action-oriented, and characteristically involves participants' emotions (Meacham et al., 2022). Suda is originally a gendered term used most exclusively to describe Korean women's everyday conversations, and has historically been marginalized within dominant male discourses (Meacham et al., 2022). Meacham et al. (2022) argue that Suda is constructive rather than shameful, that participants engage in conversations of depth comparable to counseling exchanges while the hierarchical relationship between counselor and client is absent, and that Suda is truly dialogic because it does not impose anyone's preexisting end goals on participants.

Meacham et al. (2022) theorize Suda as rhizomatic in character, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (2004, as cited in Meacham et al., 2022) concept of non-hierarchical knowledge production to describe how Suda conversations grow horizontally, without a root-stem hierarchy, branching and returning in ways that allow meaning to surface through accumulation rather than linear progression (Meacham et al., 2022). The framework positions Suda as a decolonizing research methodology, one that challenges mainstream epistemological traditions by validating indigenous and culturally specific approaches to knowledge production (Meacham et al., 2022). Meacham et al. (2022) argue that research methods should emerge from researchers' and participants' own cultural backgrounds rather

than being imported from dominant Western frameworks, and that Suda's transition from everyday Korean cultural practice to research methodology was possible because they reflected on their own cultural backgrounds to develop research methods suitable to their ways of knowing.

Suda functions in this study at two related levels. As a theoretical lens, it provides a framework for understanding how relational, communal conversation generates meaning, builds identity, and sustains community, particularly for people navigating institutions that do not reflect their cultural backgrounds (Meacham et al., 2022). As a methodological orientation, it shapes the conditions under which knowledge is gathered, favoring settings characterized by informality, shared experience, the absence of hierarchical research relationships, and the freedom to move between topics and languages without being directed toward predetermined outcomes (Meacham et al., 2022). Meacham et al. (2022) describe their own Suda-based research as emerging organically from conversations that always began with *어떻게 지내?* (How are you?) with no specific agenda in advance, and in which research topics evolved naturally within the Suda rather than being imposed upon it.

Suda is in productive dialogue with *pláticas*, the Chicana/Latina feminist methodological tradition theorized by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) and extended by Hannegan-Martinez (2023). Both Suda and *pláticas* challenge the hierarchical and extractive tendencies of conventional research relationships, create space for the co-construction of knowledge among participants positioned as experts of their own experience, and insist that informal relational talk is epistemologically valid and analytically productive (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Hannegan-Martinez, 2023; Meacham et al., 2022). Hannegan-Martinez (2023) theorizes *pláticas* as a praxis of love in which the relationship between

researcher and participants is itself a site of transformative meaning-making. The methodological principle Meacham et al. (2022) advance is that methods should emerge from the communities being studied, and that using frameworks originating in one community's epistemological traditions as a universal template for research on other communities replicates the methodological universalism that culturally sustaining scholarship is designed to refuse (Meacham et al., 2022). Suda and pláticas are both legitimate traditions; Meacham et al. (2022) locate the value of Suda specifically in its emergence from Korean cultural practice rather than in its superiority to other relational methodologies.

Food as the Site Where the Frameworks Converge. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model and Suda approach the study's central concern from complementary directions. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model asks what institutions must do to produce culturally engaging environments for students of color, attending to which indicators of cultural familiarity, validation, and support are present or absent, and what consequences these have for student belonging and success (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). Suda asks what participants do in relational spaces, how meaning is made collectively, how cultural identity is sustained through communal practice, and how knowledge that resists production in formal institutional settings becomes visible through relational conversation (Meacham et al., 2022). Community cultural wealth, as theorized by Yosso (2005), names the forms of capital students mobilize through both: the familial capital embedded in food knowledge, the navigational capital required to locate culturally familiar resources outside the institution, the social capital of peer networks organized around shared cultural practices, and the resistant capital that drives students to build what the institution does not provide.

Food functions as the site where these frameworks converge because it is simultaneously an institutional practice and a relational one. As an institutional practice, food is the kind of daily, repeated encounter that the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model is designed to evaluate: whether the campus food environment demonstrates cultural familiarity, validates students' cultural identities, and communicates through its design whose cultures the institution treats as ordinary rather than exceptional (Museus, 2014; Weaver-Hightower, 2022). As a relational practice, food is inseparable from the conditions that Suda requires and produces: the act of preparing and sharing food together creates the informality, embodied togetherness, and emotional openness through which Suda-based knowledge is generated (Meacham et al., 2022). Scholarship on food and cultural identity reviewed earlier in this chapter establishes that food functions simultaneously as an emotional anchor, a cultural transmission mechanism, and a marker of community membership (Jung, 2015; Locher et al., 2005; Wright et al., 2021), which is precisely why it occupies the intersection of institutional assessment and relational inquiry that this study requires.

The scholarship reviewed in this chapter documents what campus food environments look like, how they may leave particular students underserved, and why those conditions are structurally produced. That literature, however, stops short of examining how these dynamics operate for disaggregated groups of minoritized students, such as Korean American students, in a campus food environment they are required to inhabit, and through the lens of students' own interpretive frameworks. Food is a cultural practice embedded in relational and moral values, and the institutional food environments students inhabit communicate whose cultures an institution recognizes as ordinary and whose it treats as exceptional (Jung, 2015; Kittler et al., 2017; Weaver-Hightower, 2022). Campus food environments have been documented as

organized around institutional efficiency and a presumed mainstream palate, with cultural adequacy receiving far less scholarly attention than nutrition and food insecurity (Li et al., 2022; Weaver-Hightower, 2022). The structural force behind that pattern is White normativity, an institutional default so thoroughly normalized it presents as neutral, with particular consequences for Asian American students whose needs are further obscured by the model minority myth (Goodwin, 2010; Morris, 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Teranishi et al., 2009). Against that backdrop, students of color mobilize the forms of cultural wealth Yosso (2005) names, building peer networks, navigating institutional gaps, and sustaining cultural identities through relational practices their campuses may not provide. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model provides the framework for examining whether and how institutions meet the standard of cultural familiarity and validation that the belonging literature establishes as consequential for student persistence and success (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012), and Suda provides the relational methodology for gathering knowledge about these experiences in a way that honors the cultural specificity of the community being studied (Meacham et al., 2022). Chapter Three describes the methodological design developed to address that gap.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore Korean American undergraduate students' lived experiences with campus dining and access to culturally meaningful food while living on campus. Specifically, this study attends to the ways that college students who live on campus navigate institutional dining systems and local food environments in their everyday lives, particularly in contexts where access to Korean food is limited. To that end, I approached food as a material necessity through which emotions, memories, and cultural meanings are also expressed and interpreted (Goodman, 2016; Seko et al., 2023). By centering students' perspectives, I sought to understand how college students' food-related experiences interact with their feelings of belonging and care within higher education institutions.

Guided by this purpose, the study addressed the following research questions. First, how do Korean American undergraduate students describe their food experiences within campus dining and local food environments? Second, what emotions, memories, and cultural meanings do these students attach to Korean food? Third, how do these meanings inform students' sense of belonging and care in higher education? Taken together, these questions foreground students' interpretations of food experiences and situate those interpretations within broader institutional and cultural contexts.

Qualitative Approach and Rationale

This study employs a qualitative research design to capture the depth and complexity of students' lived experiences with food. A qualitative approach is suited to these research questions because they center meaning-making, emotional responses, and culturally situated interpretations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Moving

beyond traditional Western paradigms that often position researchers as objective observers, this inquiry is grounded in decolonizing methodologies¹ that prioritize relationality and the disruption of colonial research legacies (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). By centering the voices of those often marginalized in academic discourse, this approach seeks to transform research from an extractive exercise into a site of transformative praxis (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This shift requires a commitment to "uncollapsing" ethics, in which the researcher moves beyond mere institutional compliance and towards decolonizing research methods to ensure that the research process does not replicate settler-colonial harm (Tuck & Guishard, 2012). Qualitative inquiry thus allows for close attention to students' narratives and language, attending closely to the language students used to express their feelings and memories around food.

For this study, I frame research as a relational endeavor, recognizing that knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed through the interconnectedness of the researcher and the participants (Patel, 2015a, 2015b). Grounded in an "epistemology of family," this design centers mutuality and care as rigorous methodological commitments rather than mere rapport-building techniques (Malone et al., 2023; Wilson, 2020). This orientation is important because dominant academic norms often position whiteness as neutral, objective, and universal, thereby marginalizing other epistemologies and rendering culturally grounded knowledge practices less legitimate (Gillborn, 2005; Harper, 2012; Morris, 2016). By choosing to see research as a relationship, I commit to being responsible to students and their

¹ Decolonizing methodologies challenge the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in dominant research traditions, including the positioning of the researcher as a neutral, objective observer and the treatment of research participants as data sources rather than knowledge holders. Such approaches prioritize relationality, community accountability, and the disruption of extractive research practices (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Tuck & Guishard, 2012; Patel, 2015a)

communities in concrete ways: by refusing deficit-based framings, being transparent about how institutional power shapes what becomes knowable, and honoring the limits of what participants choose to share (Patel, 2015a; Tuck & Yang, 2013). This approach supports an examination of how individual experiences are shaped by institutional structures and policies related to campus dining, and it refuses research practices that pathologize marginalized communities, foregrounding instead students' agency, desire, and strengths as they navigate and reshape institutional contexts (Tuck & Yang, 2013).

Multiple qualitative data sources were used to examine students' experiences from complementary perspectives, including semi-structured interviews, dining hall observations, gimhap chats, document collection, and researcher reflexive journaling. These methods were intentionally selected to capture both individual and collective dimensions of food experiences, as well as the institutional contexts in which those experiences occur. This multimodal design aligns with participatory action research (PAR) principles, which view participants as experts of their own lives rather than subjects to be analyzed (Cahill et al., 2008). A primary example of this is the "gimhap chat," a culturally responsive method used in this study that I modeled after the Suda methodology (Meacham et al., 2022). As discussed in the previous chapter, Suda is a Korean cultural practice of casual, organic talk that functions as a decolonizing research tradition by challenging mainstream, rigid ways of knowing through rhizomatic dialogue (Meacham et al., 2022). By integrating these communal conversations, the study creates a "contact zone" where students can safely negotiate their identities and express their needs within the university environment (Torre et al., 2008). Using multiple data sources allowed for analytic convergence across data types,

strengthening interpretations of belonging, cultural meaning, and institutional care as they emerged across participants' accounts and observed practices.

Research Site: Uri University

This study was conducted at a public Research 1 (R1) university located on the West Coast, referred to by the pseudonym Uri University. The name Uri, meaning 우리 or “our” in Korean, was selected as the pseudonym to reflect the study’s focus on collective belonging, shared responsibility, and relational meaning-making within institutional spaces. Uri University enrolls over 20,000 undergraduate students and nearly 3,000 graduate students, positioning it as a large, residential, research-intensive institution within the public higher education system. As an R1 institution, the university combines high levels of research activity with a substantial undergraduate population, shaping both institutional priorities and student experiences (*About Carnegie Classifications*, n.d.; *Uri University*, n.d.)².

Uri University holds federal designation as a Minority-Serving Institution through its status as both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) (Uri University Website, n.d.). These designations reflect the university’s undergraduate enrollment, which includes substantial proportions of Latinx/Chicanx, Asian American, and Pacific Islander students (Uri University Website, 2023). At the time of this study, Asian American students comprised just under 30 percent of the undergraduate population, making them one of the largest racialized student groups on campus (Uri University Website, 2023). The AANAPISI designation is particularly relevant for this study (Uri University Website, n.d.), as it signals

² Identifying details in select citations have been modified to preserve site confidentiality in accordance with IRB recommendations (Stoddart, 2013).

formal federal recognition of the university's responsibility to serve Asian American students, while also raising questions about how such commitments are enacted within everyday institutional systems such as campus dining.

Geographically, Uri University is situated in a region with limited access to Korean restaurants, grocery stores, and culturally specific food spaces in the surrounding community. Although the student body draws heavily from areas of the state with robust Korean American populations, relocation to this geographic context often entails a significant reduction in access to Korean food (*Korean Grocery Stores in Beach Town*, 2025; *Korean Restaurants in Beach Town*, 2025; Uri University Website, 2023). For Korean American students, this shift heightens the importance of institutional food systems as sites where cultural familiarity, comfort, and care may be experienced or constrained. As a result, campus dining becomes a particularly salient context for examining how institutional environments support or fail to support culturally meaningful practices.

Housing patterns further structure students' reliance on campus dining. A substantial proportion of undergraduates live in university-owned residence halls or apartments, particularly during their first and second years, while many others reside in the local university area of Beach Town (pseudonym), a dense student community immediately adjacent to campus. First-year students are guaranteed university housing, and although living on campus is not required beyond that, many students choose to do so due to the high cost and limited availability of housing in the surrounding area. Further, for students living in university-owned residence halls at Uri University, participation in a campus meal plan is mandatory, although students may switch between meal plan tiers with different numbers of weekly meals (Uri University Website, 2024b). These conditions tie students' daily food

access closely to institutional dining policies and food offerings, and they position campus dining halls as central sites in students' everyday lives. As a result, dining halls become especially important locations for examining experiences of belonging, cultural recognition, and institutional care.

To understand the broader food landscape surrounding Uri University, I conducted a preliminary environmental scan of local food resources prior to and during data collection. This included reviewing publicly available information about grocery stores and restaurants within a five-mile radius of campus, mapping locations using online directories, and documenting accessibility via public transportation routes (*Korean Grocery Stores in Beach Town, 2025; Korean Restaurants in Beach Town, 2025*). Through this process, I confirmed that there are no Korean supermarkets in the immediate area. Access to Korean groceries is primarily limited to a small number of pan-Asian mini-markets, most of which are located off major bus routes and require additional travel time from campus. During preliminary environmental visits conducted in October 2024 to February 2025, I observed that these markets carried some Korean packaged goods but offered a limited selection of fresh Korean vegetables and staple ingredients, limiting the feasibility of regularly preparing Korean meals.

Restaurant information was gathered through the same process, using Google maps to search for Korean restaurants within a thirty-mile radius of campus, with in-person verification visits conducted between October 2024 and May 2025. During the period of data collection, Korean food was available in Beach Town through a small number of independently operated eateries, including a dining counter located within an Asian market and a recently opened Korean fusion quick-service restaurant. No standalone Korean

supermarkets were identified within the immediate vicinity of campus during this scan. This environmental mapping was conducted as part of the case selection and contextualization process rather than as a primary data source. While Korean food was not entirely absent from the surrounding community, availability appeared limited in scale and concentrated in small, independently operated establishments. This broader food landscape formed part of the contextual rationale for selecting Uri University as a case study site and informed the decision to examine campus dining halls as primary and structurally consistent food environments for students.

Overview of the Campus Dining System. Uri University operates a centralized campus dining system that functions as an auxiliary enterprise, meaning it is fully self-funded and does not receive direct support from tuition or state appropriations (Uri University Website, 2025). Campus Dining encompasses multiple dining commons, retail food venues, catering services, concessions, and a campus food pantry, serving tens of thousands of students and guests annually (Uri University, 2025). Approximately 35% of room and board revenue is allocated to campus dining operations, which cover food costs, labor, facilities, maintenance, and related expenses (Uri University Website, 2024a, 2024b). As an auxiliary unit, Campus Dining must balance financial sustainability and operational efficiency with institutional commitments to student well-being, diversity, and inclusion (Uri University Website, 2024b).

The core of the dining system consists of four all-you-care-to-eat dining commons that operate on a swipe-based meal plan model. Students living in residence halls are required to purchase a residential meal plan as part of their housing contract, making dining hall access effectively mandatory for many undergraduates. Meal plans vary by the number

of weekly swipes permitted, typically ranging from 10 to 19 meals per week, with limited rollover of unused meals that expire at the end of each academic quarter (Uri University Website, 2024b). The cost of the dining plans is bundled with the cost of room and board (Uri University Website, 2024b), so the exact cost per meal was not found on any public-facing sources. Once weekly swipes are exhausted, students incur additional charges for dining hall entry, reinforcing the structured and regulated nature of food access. Changes to residential meal plans are permitted only during a narrow window early in the quarter, and changes may result in the forfeiture of previously rolled-over meals due to system limitations (Uri University Website, 2024b). These policies shape students' dining behaviors by encouraging consistent reliance on dining halls and limiting opportunities to seek alternative food sources. For students with limited transportation, time, or financial resources, dining commons function as the most accessible and reliable food option, even when offerings do not align with cultural preferences.

Although students living off campus may purchase optional meal plans, these plans are similarly structured around weekly swipes, restricted dining locations, and limited change periods. As a result, both residential and off-campus meal plans reinforce the centrality of campus dining commons as institutional food spaces. For undergraduate students at Uri University, including the Korean American students, these spaces become key sites where emotional comfort and perceptions of institutional care are negotiated through daily food experiences.

Participants

The primary participants in this study were 16 undergraduate students who self-identified as Korean American. Participants included both 1.5-³ and second-generation Korean Americans and represented all undergraduate class standings, from first-year through fourth-year students. At the time of participation, some students lived on campus while others lived off campus, allowing the study to capture both current and retrospective perspectives on campus dining experiences. For students who had moved off campus, I asked explicitly about their off-campus food practices, including whether they continued to eat in campus dining halls and whether their prior dining experiences influenced their decision to move or their current food routines. This allowed for examination not only of experiences within residence halls but also of how those experiences shaped subsequent food choices and housing transitions. The range of class standing and housing situations therefore supported a fuller understanding of how food experiences shift over time and across institutional living arrangements. Collectively, the participant group reflected diverse trajectories through the university, including transitions between housing types and varying durations of exposure to the campus dining system.

Participants reported a range of geographic backgrounds, with most indicating hometown zip codes in California, particularly from Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area. Several participants also identified international or transnational backgrounds, including having lived abroad prior to attending the university. These geographic patterns are analytically relevant given that many participants originated from

³ The term '1.5-generation' refers to individuals who immigrated to the United States as children and were therefore socialized in both their country of origin and the United States, distinguishing them from first-generation immigrants who arrived as adults and second-generation individuals who were born in the United States (Tran, 2024; Teranishi et al., 2009)

regions with substantially greater access to Korean food than the study site. For these students, attending Uri University often involved a noticeable shift in food access and availability. To protect participant confidentiality, specific hometowns are not identified in the text, and geographic information is discussed only in aggregate form.

In addition to the undergraduate participants, I conducted contextual interviews with two campus representatives whose work intersected with Korean food, cultural programming, and student well-being. The first was with the president of the Korean Student Club, referred to by the pseudonym Rina. The second was with a group of representatives representing the culturally familiar snack initiative from a campus unit that had organized food and culture-related programming during the period of data collection. Both interviews were conducted independently from the student interviews and brought the total number of recorded interviews to 18. These interviews were not conducted to gather student experience data and are not included in the undergraduate participant table; rather, they are treated analytically as supplemental contextual data used to situate the institutional and organizational conditions in which students' food experiences unfolded.

All student participants selected their own pseudonyms as part of the informed consent process to ensure their identities were represented in ways they found meaningful. Allowing participants to choose their own names was an intentional methodological decision to support participant autonomy and move away from researcher-imposed labels that can feel clinical or extractive (Allen & Wiles, 2016). This was particularly important given the relatively small and interconnected nature of the Korean American student community at the study site. To further safeguard confidentiality and honor the trust placed in this relational inquiry, participants' specific academic majors are not reported. Instead, fields of study are

referenced only in broad disciplinary categories – such as social sciences or natural and computational sciences – when necessary for contextual interpretation. This approach balances the need for descriptive depth with a rigorous ethical obligation to minimize the risk of identification, prioritizing the safety and well-being of the students above all else.

Sampling Strategy and Recruitment. This study employed purposeful sampling to recruit Korean American undergraduate students with direct experience using the campus dining system. Recruitment focused specifically on students who had lived on campus and participated in a university meal plan, as these experiences were central to addressing the study's research questions. Inclusion criteria required that participants identify as Korean American and have lived on campus with a dining plan for at least one academic year. These criteria ensured that all participants had sustained engagement with institutional dining environments rather than brief or incidental exposure.

Participants were recruited through multiple channels across campus. Recruitment posters were placed in all campus locations where posting was permitted, including in front of and inside lecture halls, on campus center bulletin boards, in front of and inside dining halls, within the university's student wellness center, and within the Asian Student Resources Center. Korean studies course instructors and teaching assistants were asked to distribute the recruitment flier to their course listservs, and resident advisors in the student residence halls were asked to post it within residential common areas. Dining hall digital advertisement monitors also displayed the recruitment flier. In addition, recruitment announcements were distributed through the email listservs and social media channels of various Korean American student organizations on campus, and classroom announcements were made in Korean language courses.

Demographic information was collected for contextual purposes using a Google Form survey sent to participants prior to their interview and confirmed verbally at the start of each interview. Information collected included year in school, housing status, generational status, broad field of study, and hometown zip code. These data were used descriptively to situate participants' narratives within their broader life contexts rather than for comparative or statistical analysis, reflecting the qualitative orientation of this study toward understanding the meaning participants make of their experiences through relational conversation rather than using data for generalizing across a population (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Meacham et al., 2022).

At the end of the individual interview, all student interview participants were invited to participate in the gimhap chats, a culturally grounded, group-based conversational method detailed later in this chapter. The students were informed that they could choose to do just the individual interviews and not the gimhap chats if they wanted, especially as their privacy could not be guaranteed in the group settings. The students who opted into the gimhap chats were self-selected into sessions based on schedule availability. As a result, only a subset of interview participants engaged in this additional data collection activity. This design allowed for multi-method participation while respecting students' time constraints and preserving flexibility in engagement across the study. See Table 1 for a brief overview of all student participants in this study.

Table 1: Summary of Student Participants

Characteristic	Category	Number of Participants
Total Undergraduate Participants		16
Generational Status	1 st generation	0
	1.5 generation	4
	2nd generation	12
	3 rd + generation	0
Year in School	First-year	6
	Second-year	5
	Third-year	2
	Fourth-year	3
Housing Status at Time of Interview	On campus	11
	Off campus	5
Geographic Background (Hometown Region)	Southern California	8
	Northern California / San Francisco Bay Area	6
	Out-of-state	1
	International / Transnational	1
Broad field of major	Social sciences / humanities	9
	Natural, computational, or physical sciences	7
Participation in Gimbap Chats	Participated in both interview and gimbap chat	10
	Interview only	6

Data Collection Methods

The primary source of data for this study was semi-structured individual interviews with 16 Korean American undergraduate students. Gimbap chats, a culturally responsive, group-based conversational method developed for this study and grounded in Suda methodology (Meacham et al., 2022), served as the second major data source, providing a collective counterpart to the individual interview data. Three supplemental sources provided contextual grounding for these primary data: dining hall observations, dining hall menu

collection, and contextual interviews with campus organizational and institutional representatives whose work intersected with food and cultural programming. Together, these methods allowed for analytic comparison across individual, collective, observational, and institutional perspectives, strengthening the depth and credibility of the findings.

Semi-Structured Student Interviews. This study relied primarily on semi-structured interviews with 16 undergraduate students who identified as Korean American. Interviews were designed to elicit detailed, experiential accounts of students' everyday food practices within campus dining halls and surrounding food environments. Students were asked to reflect not only on what they ate, but on how those experiences felt, including emotions such as comfort, frustration, nostalgia, disappointment, and belonging. Food was treated as both an everyday necessity and a culturally meaningful practice embedded within institutional life (Nukaga, 2008).

The interview approach was informed by *Suda* (수다), a Korean conversational practice that extends beyond casual chatting to encompass emotionally grounded, relational, and dialogic exchange. As theorized by Meacham et al., *Suda* is not oriented toward efficiency, problem-solving, or predetermined outcomes, but instead values conversation itself as meaningful and generative (Meacham et al., 2022). *Suda* often unfolds without a fixed agenda, allowing participants to move fluidly across topics, revisit prior moments, and dwell in emotionally resonant experiences. Importantly, *Suda* is characterized by the absence of hierarchical roles, enabling participants to speak vulnerably without the expectation of expert authority or therapeutic resolution.

Guided by this framework, interviews in this study were conducted as semi-structured conversations that combined prepared questions with a relational, conversational approach.

Although I developed an interview protocol in advance and asked all participants a shared set of core questions, the interviews were intentionally situated within a more informal and hospitable setting, in an on-campus lounge room with couches and kitchen access. In addition, to promote a more casual and friendly Suda environment, participants were offered Korean snacks and food upon arrival, and time was taken at the beginning of each session to chat about topics unrelated to the study. This mood-setting time allowed the initial interaction to unfold more naturally before transitioning into interview questions. To aid their level of comfort, the students were also given the option to conduct the interview in a private research office, another private location on campus of their choosing, or via Zoom for two of the sixteen student interviews.

Within this structure, participants were encouraged to revisit questions, follow tangents, and linger on memories that felt significant to them, even when doing so disrupted linear narrative flow. This approach allowed interviews to proceed at uneven rhythms, at times circling back to earlier reflections or pausing around emotionally charged memories related to food, home, or belonging. Consistent with Meacham et al. (2022)'s description of Suda as dialogic and relational, meaning emerged through interaction rather than extraction. In several cases, conversations extended beyond the formal end of the interview, with participants remaining in the space to continue talking while sharing food, reflecting the comfort and openness fostered by this approach. Conversations frequently shifted between present-day dining routines and past experiences with food at home, during childhood, or in other geographic contexts, illustrating the temporal layering that Suda makes possible.

Participants were also encouraged to translanguage⁴ between Korean and English during interviews, according to their comfort level and expressed needs (García et al., 2021). I modeled this practice by using Korean terms for foods and food practices and by incorporating Korean words or phrases into follow-up questions when it aligned with the flow of the conversation (J. K. Jung et al., 2026). Participants were free to move between languages without needing to translate themselves or maintain consistency across the interview. This approach supported more precise expression of emotion, memory, and cultural meaning, particularly when discussing food-related experiences that did not translate cleanly into English. When Korean was used, I reviewed and translated transcripts during the transcription process, attending carefully to contextual meaning rather than literal equivalence.

Across interviews, several core topics were consistently addressed, though not always in the same sequence. These included daily dining routines, strategies for navigating campus dining halls, perceptions of food quality and variety, access to Korean food on and off campus, and feelings of belonging or alienation related to food. Students were also asked to reflect on how their food experiences changed over time, particularly as they moved between years in school or housing situations. A list of guiding questions is included in Appendix A; however, consistent with the semi-structured and Suda-informed design of the interviews, not all questions were asked in the same order, nor were all questions asked in every interview (Meacham et al., 2022; Patton, 2015). The protocol functioned as a flexible guide

⁴ Translanguaging refers to the dynamic practice of drawing on a speaker's full linguistic repertoire across named languages, rather than switching between bounded, separate language systems. It treats multilingual speakers' fluid movement between languages as a communicative resource rather than a deviation from monolingual norms (García et al., 2021)

rather than a script, allowing conversation to follow participants' narratives, return to earlier themes, or expand organically in response to emerging topics (Meacham et al., 2022; Patton, 2015). This loose structure preserved comparability across interviews while honoring the relational and dialogic flow central to Suda-based conversation.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed using Otter.ai. I reviewed each transcript closely, correcting transcription errors and clarifying unclear passages. I reviewed and translated interviews that included Korean language use, as I am fluent in both Korean and English. Immediately following each interview, I completed reflexive journal entries capturing first impressions, emotional tone, moments of resonance, and emerging analytic questions (Meyer & Willis, 2019). These entries often documented aspects of the interaction that were not fully visible in transcripts alone. Over time, these journals became an important site for tracing patterns across interviews.

Gimbap Chats. I conducted three gimbap chat sessions as a culturally responsive, group-based conversational method developed for this study and grounded in Suda methodology (Meacham et al., 2022). These sessions were designed to elicit collective reflection through shared food preparation and eating. Participation was limited to students who had completed an individual interview, allowing the group conversations to build on themes that had already emerged in one-on-one settings. Unlike the semi-structured interviews, which followed a prepared protocol and ensured that all participants were asked the same core questions, the gimbap chats were intentionally loosely structured. As reflected in the session guide included in Appendix B, prepared questions were brief and functioned primarily as prompts in case of a lull in conversation, which rarely occurred. These sessions were designed to reflect Suda in its fullest sense, allowing conversation to unfold organically

without predetermined sequencing or thematic constraints. Food preparation served as both a shared activity and an entry point into conversation.

The three sessions were conducted on separate days. The first was scheduled with five invited participants, all of whom attended. For the second and third sessions, four students were invited to each, though attendance varied due to scheduling constraints: the second session included two participants and the third included three, resulting in ten unique participants across all sessions. Each session involved collaborative gimbap making followed by shared eating and informal conversation. Most ingredients and side dishes were prepared in advance: vegetables stir-fried, meat or tuna cooked and seasoned, and side dishes such as kimchi and soup set out alongside Korean beverages and snacks. The final steps of rolling and cutting the gimbap were left for participants themselves. Each person selected the ingredients they wanted, rolled their own gimbap, and cut it to their preference. Each person selected the ingredients they wanted, rolled their own gimbap, and cut it to their preference. Food was prepared in generous quantities to ensure there was more than enough for everyone, and students were strongly encouraged to take home any leftover gimbap, ramyeon, and snacks afterward. This design gave participants autonomy over what went into their food and in what proportion, and created a shared, hands-on activity that modeled the Korean cultural practice of preparing and sharing food communally as an expression of welcome and collective care (H. Jung, 2015), allowing the more comfortable, unhurried pace of Suda to begin naturally (Meacham et al., 2022). Photographs of the prepared food are included in Appendix C.

Following a loosely structured session guide (Appendix B), I opened each session by asking participants to introduce themselves using their chosen pseudonym, share their major

at Uri University, and respond to an icebreaker question. I then described the purpose of the meeting and grounded the conversation by sharing my own relationship to gimhap: a food my mother always offered to make for me in high school, which I declined out of embarrassment about the smell, and which I finally shared with roommates in college, discovering they loved it. This personal story was an invitation for participants to share their own food memories before the conversation began. I introduced prompts sparingly and primarily when conversation stalled, prioritizing participant-led discussion over researcher direction. Topics emerged in response to shared memories, sensory cues from food preparation, and participants' reactions to one another's stories. Conversation flow varied across sessions, shaped by group size, participant familiarity, and the emotional tone of the discussion.

The gimhap prepared during these sessions was made using my mother's recipe, a copy of which is included in Appendix D. The choice to use her recipe was deliberate and methodologically meaningful. Consistent with the principles of Suda as described by Meacham et al. (2022), which emphasize that genuine relational exchange requires the researcher to bring her full, sincere self to the encounter rather than occupying a detached expert role, using my mother's recipe was an act of methodological care. I chose gimhap specifically because, to me, it is a food of love. It is labor-intensive to prepare: each ingredient must be cooked separately, then layered together with rice and carefully rolled in seaweed before being sliced into bite-sized pieces, each one containing the full composition of what was made. Yet for the person eating, it is easy, portable, nourishing, and delicious — the effort of the maker absorbed entirely into the pleasure of the receiver. That asymmetry is part of what gimhap means to me, as it was often how my mother communicated her care and

love, and it is part of what I wanted to bring into the research space. To prepare it from her recipe was to bring my whole self to this study: not only my identity as a Korean American researcher, but the specific kind of care I grew up with, carried in the particular way my 엄마 (umma/mom) makes it. It was a way of expressing gratitude to participants for sharing their knowledge, wisdom, and stories with me, and of communicating, without words, that this was not an extractive encounter. To offer this food was an invitation to gather, eat, and talk together as people who share something, rather than as researcher and subjects. In this way, the food itself became an expression of the relational and non-hierarchical ethos that Suda requires (Meacham et al., 2022).

All gimhap chats were audio-recorded, and I recorded detailed field notes documenting group dynamics, emotional tone, and moments of convergence or divergence. Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and then reviewed, edited, and translated by me as needed. I analyzed these data alongside interview transcripts to examine how students articulated experiences differently in collective versus individual contexts.

Following each session, participants completed a brief, open-ended feedback survey asking them to reflect on their comfort level, the perceived value of the experience, and their overall impressions of the format. I used these responses as supplemental, descriptive data rather than as a primary analytic source. Survey comments helped clarify why certain moments felt meaningful to participants and offered additional insight into how students experienced the relational and conversational dimensions of the gimhap chats.

Dining Hall Observations. I conducted dining hall observations over a two-week period during weeks ten (the last week of classes in the quarter) and finals week of the same academic quarter in which interviews took place. During this period, I visited campus dining

halls daily for both breakfast and dinner, rotating across dining locations to observe variation in menus, spatial layout, and atmosphere. Conducting observations at the end of the quarter allowed me to capture dining experiences during a period of heightened academic pressure, when students often relied more heavily on institutional food systems. Throughout the observation period, I adopted a participant-observer role, using the dining halls as a student would, to better understand the food environments participants described in interviews. These visits allowed me to experience the menus, food presentation, and material conditions of dining firsthand and to situate participants' accounts within the institutional context in which they occurred. My observations focused on menu offerings, the availability and consistency of items, the presence or absence of culturally relevant⁵ and culturally meaningful foods, and the overall quality of the food, including temperature and presentation. I also documented features of the dining setup, such as utensils provided, condiment stations, signage and labeling, queue length, and the flow and accessibility of food service. I paid particular attention to how these elements shaped the overall dining experience and structured the kinds of food choices available at a given moment.

I recorded detailed field notes immediately after each dining hall visit to capture specific features of the food environment while they were still fresh in my mind. Throughout the observation period, I maintained a daily reflexive journal to document my sensory impressions, emotional responses to repeated dining experiences, and shifts in perception over time. These entries allowed me to reflect on how my understanding of the dining halls

⁵ Culturally relevant foods' is used here as an observational category referring to foods recognizable as belonging to the culinary traditions of specific non-dominant cultural groups, consistent with Agaronov et al.'s (2019) concept of food culture mismatch and Weaver-Hightower's (2022) framework for examining what foodscapes communicate about institutional values.

evolved across days and locations, particularly as patterns of consistency and repetition became more apparent. Field notes and journals also supported analytic connections between students' interview accounts and the institutional food environments in which those experiences were situated. Together, these materials functioned as a contextual resource that informed interpretation rather than as stand-alone observational data.

Dining Hall Menu Collection. To contextualize students' accounts and my dining hall observations, I also collected dining hall menus for all campus dining halls across one academic quarter. I systematically gathered menus by logging on to the campus dining website and downloading the menu each week to document the range, frequency, and consistency of food offerings over time. This collection allowed me to examine patterns of menu rotation, variation across dining locations, and the appearance or absence of Korean or Korean-influenced dishes. The temporal scope of menu collection aligned with the period during which interviews and observations were conducted, supporting cross-data comparison.

I treated menus as institutional artifacts rather than objective representations of students' dining experiences. They provided an official record of what was offered, not how food was experienced, received, or interpreted. Comparing menus with interview and observational data allowed me to identify points of alignment and divergence between institutional representations and lived experience. As part of the broader multi-method design, document collection contributed to a grounded understanding of campus dining as an institutional system rather than a neutral or purely service-oriented space.

Contextual Interviews. In addition to the primary interview and gimhap chat data, I conducted contextual interviews with two campus entities whose work intersected with

Korean food, cultural programming, and student well-being. These interviews were not part of the primary student data and were treated analytically as supplemental contextual data, used to situate students' accounts within broader institutional and organizational frameworks. For one, because student participants frequently referenced Korean student organizations when discussing food access, community events, and collective advocacy efforts, I sought to include organizational leadership perspectives as part of the study's contextual data collection. Food-related programming and interactions with campus administrators were often described as emerging through these organizations rather than through individual action. Including leadership voices therefore allowed me to situate students' personal dining experiences within broader organizational and institutional contexts.

I reached out to leaders of all Korean-identified student organizations on campus, with particular attention to the Korean Student Club and the Korean American Student Club (both pseudonyms), as both were repeatedly named in student interviews. My intention was to compare how different organizations understood and addressed issues related to Korean food, cultural programming, and institutional responsiveness. While Korean Student Club leadership agreed to participate in a recorded interview, Korean American Student Club leadership did not participate in an interview despite multiple outreach attempts. However, I was granted permission to attend one general meeting hosted by the latter organization, during which food preparation was part of the event programming. I documented field notes during this meeting. These observational notes were incorporated as supplemental contextual data to enhance my understanding of the campus environment as a researcher, but were not treated as interview material.

I also conducted an interview with a representative from Uri University's Student Wellness Center (pseudonym), a campus unit that had organized programming on culture and food during the data collection period. This interview was sought because during preliminary research of Uri University, I learned of this departments' institutional efforts around food and cultural programming. This interview was done with two department staff members and four student workers. The interview was conducted in the representative's capacity as an institutional actor rather than as a student, and it is therefore treated as contextual data that helps situate the institutional conditions in which students' food experiences unfolded. Together, these two contextual interviews allowed me to understand organizational and institutional perspectives alongside the student-centered accounts that form the primary basis of analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

I used an inductive qualitative analytic approach to examine how Korean American undergraduate students made meaning of their food experiences within institutional and local contexts. I used Dedoose, a cloud-based platform that supported the organization and comparison of multiple qualitative data sources, including semi-structured interviews, gimhap chats, observations, and researcher reflexive journaling. An inductive approach allowed patterns, categories, and themes to emerge directly from participants' accounts rather than being predetermined by rigid theoretical frameworks (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This was particularly important given the study's focus on lived experience, affect, and the cultural nuances of meaning-making around food. Throughout the analytic process, deliberate attention was paid to both convergence and variation across participants, ensuring that the diversity of student voices remained at the center of the findings.

While formal transcribing and coding took place after the data collection period, the analytic process began through continuous reflexive journaling during the fieldwork. This ongoing reflection allowed early insights to inform the focus of subsequent interviews and gimhap chats, ensuring the inquiry remained responsive to the students' evolving narratives. The decision to conclude all data collection before beginning official coding was a deliberate act of care intended to accommodate the students' busy schedules within the short, high-pressure quarter system. By prioritizing the students' availability and avoiding the stress of final exams, I was able to capture their experiences while they were fresh and meaningful during the Spring quarter. This timing ensured that participants had a full academic year of institutional experiences to draw upon, grounding the final analysis in the complete "data corpus" of their lived realities.

Coding Process. All qualitative data sources were uploaded into Dedoose and included in the coding process, including interview transcripts, gimhap chat transcripts, dining hall observation field notes, reflexive journal entries, and analytic memos. Initial open coding was applied across all data sources to identify recurring ideas, language, and moments of emphasis. During this phase, codes remained intentionally descriptive and expansive, capturing references to food routines, emotional responses, cultural familiarity, memory, institutional interactions, and relational dynamics (Saldaña, 2021). Coding at this stage involved in vivo coding, as it prioritized staying close to participants' language rather than imposing interpretive labels.

As coding progressed, focused and axial coding were used to refine and organize open codes into broader analytic categories related to food access, cultural meaning, belonging, and institutional practices (Saldaña, 2021). For example, initial open codes such

as “pizza as default,” “checking international station first,” “rice is inedible,” “kimchi not real,” “feels like bare minimum,” and “eating in dorm room alone” were later clustered into higher-order categories including White Normativity as Institutional Default, Inauthentic Representation, and Emotional Hunger (Heogijim). Similarly, codes such as “it’s fine, it’s protein,” “they have to serve the masses,” and “I’m happy they at least tried” were grouped into the analytic category of Internalized Deservingness and Minimal Effort, capturing the pattern of students tempering critique with resignation or gratitude. This phase involved examining relationships among codes and identifying how individual experiences connected to shared structural patterns across participants. I compared codes across interviews, gimbap chats, field notes, and menu documents to examine how themes surfaced differently depending on setting and format. Earlier transcripts were revisited multiple times as categories became more clearly defined, allowing refinement of analytic boundaries and strengthening conceptual coherence across themes.

Throughout the coding process, I used analytic memos to document emerging interpretations, tensions, and questions. These memos captured moments when data challenged my initial assumptions, revealed contradictions, or suggested new lines of inquiry. Memo-writing functioned as a bridge between coding and interpretation, supporting reflexive engagement with the data and making analytic decision-making visible. Together, coding and memo-writing supported a systematic yet flexible analytic process.

Theoretical Interpretation. Following inductive coding, I interpreted the findings through the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) framework, paying particular attention to constructs related to cultural relevance, cultural familiarity, and institutional responsiveness. Rather than using the framework as a coding schema, I applied

it during the interpretive phase to deepen my understanding of how students' food experiences reflected broader institutional practices and priorities. This approach allowed participants' voices to remain central while situating their experiences within existing scholarship on belonging and engagement.

Theoretical interpretation focused on the ways that food functioned as an institutional practice through which care, recognition, and exclusion were communicated. I analyzed how students' emotional and cultural responses to food were shaped by structural features of campus dining, such as menu design, meal plan policies, and geographic isolation. The framework supported the interpretation of food beyond individual preference to a culturally and institutionally mediated experience. This phase of analysis also highlighted points where students' experiences aligned with, extended, or complicated existing theoretical understandings of culturally engaging environments.

Rigor and Ethical Considerations. The rigor of this study was supported through the use of multiple qualitative data sources, including individual interviews, gimhap chats, dining hall observations, document collection, and reflexive journaling. Examining patterns across these data sources allowed for analytic convergence and strengthened the credibility of the findings. Rather than treating any single method as definitive, I developed insights by comparing how themes surfaced across individual, group-based, observational, and institutional contexts. This approach made it possible to identify both consistencies and points of tension in how students described food, culture, and belonging. I paid attention to variation across participants and treated settings as analytically productive rather than as a limitation.

Sustained reflexivity throughout the research process further bolstered the rigor of this study. As previously described, I maintained ongoing analytic memos and daily research journals to document emerging interpretations, contextual observations, and analytic decisions. These materials captured how my positionality, emotional responses, and prior experiences shaped data collection and analysis. Reflexive writing also allowed me to track how certain assumptions were challenged or revised over time. By documenting analytic shifts and uncertainties, reflexivity functioned as a form of transparency rather than self-disclosure. Together, memo-writing and journaling supported analytic accountability and helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Confidentiality and Data Security. Participant confidentiality was prioritized throughout the study. All participants selected their own pseudonyms, which were used in transcripts, analytic materials, and all written products. Identifying details, including specific hometowns, academic majors, and organizational roles, were either omitted or reported only in aggregate form. These precautions were particularly important given the relatively small and interconnected Korean American student community at the study site. In addition, all audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, analytic memos, and reflexive journals were stored on password-protected devices and secure cloud storage accessible only to me. Physical notes, when used, were stored in a locked location. Data will be retained and destroyed in accordance with IRB-approved protocols. These procedures were implemented to ensure both participant privacy and data integrity throughout and beyond the duration of the study.

Researcher Positionality

I approach this study as a Korean American, 1.5-generation researcher whose own experiences with food, migration, and higher education inform how I understand the role of

culturally meaningful food⁶ in students' lives. I immigrated to the United States as a child and grew up in a Korean immigrant household in which meals structured daily life and served as primary expressions of care. Korean food in my home was tied to expressions of affection and relational closeness; it marked both ordinary evenings and moments of stress or transition. When I left home for college, the absence of familiar foods felt disorienting and confusing, something a bit beyond inconvenience that I did not then know how to name. I recall actively seeking out Korean food when I felt overwhelmed and feeling a stubborn sense of longing when it was unavailable in its authentic form. These experiences shaped my initial assumption that food functions as an emotional and cultural anchor, and that its absence in institutional spaces may carry meaning beyond preference. Entering this study, I was aware that I might be predisposed to interpret food through a lens of comfort and belonging, and I therefore remained attentive to moments when participants expressed indifference, ambivalence, or pragmatic adaptation rather than emotional attachment.

My positionality influenced both the design of the study and my interactions with participants. Shared cultural reference points, including familiarity with Korean food practices, immigrant family dynamics, and conversational norms such as *Suda*, often facilitated rapport and allowed participants to speak openly about emotionally grounded experiences. At times, students referenced foods, family rituals, or Korean-language expressions without extended explanation, and I was able to follow and respond without requiring translation or clarification. At the same time, I remained attentive to the ways in which shared ethnic identity does not produce a uniform experience. Participants varied in

⁶ Throughout this study, 'culturally meaningful food' refers to foods and food practices that carry personal, familial, and community significance beyond their nutritional function, including the memories, relational values, and cultural identities they carry for specific communities (Chen, 2009; Locher et al., 2005; Jung, 2015).

generational status, geographic upbringing, language fluency, and degree of connection to Korean culture. I approached these differences as analytically meaningful variations that complicated any singular narrative of “the” Korean American food experience.

Throughout the research process, I engaged reflexively with my roles as an insider to Korean American cultural contexts, as a graduate student residing near campus during the period of data collection, and as a researcher interpreting participants’ accounts. My familiarity with campus dining operations and housing structures stemmed not only from personal experience as a student, but also from prior professional work in higher education student affairs. This background meant I was attentive to how policies are designed, how auxiliary enterprises function, and how student feedback mechanisms operate. It also meant I was predisposed to look for structural explanations rather than individual deficits when students described frustration. Through reflexive journaling and analytic memos, I documented moments of resonance, surprise, and discomfort, particularly when participants’ interpretations of institutional practices diverged from my own (Meyer & Willis, 2019). This practice allowed me to interrogate how my professional training and personal experiences shaped the questions I asked, the moments I lingered on during interviews and gimbab chats, and the analytic weight I assigned to certain themes.

My positionality also shaped how I understood the institutional context of the study. Having previously worked in roles related to housing, student services, and campus programming, I am familiar with how meal plan requirements, auxiliary budgeting structures, and geographic isolation can function as institutional constraints rather than neutral logistics. This familiarity heightened my sensitivity to policy design and operational language during document collection and analysis. At the same time, I was cautious not to project institutional

critique where participants expressed accommodation or satisfaction. Grounding interpretations in participants' narratives and comparing across interviews, observations, documents, and gimhap chats allowed me to maintain analytic balance. Rather than positioning myself as either fully insider or fully outsider, I understand my role as relationally situated, with access to cultural nuance alongside responsibility for disciplined interpretation.

Situating the Study Moving Forward

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach guiding the study, including the research design, institutional context, participant selection, data collection methods, analytic procedures, and ethical considerations. Together, these choices were intended to center Korean American students' lived experiences while attending carefully to the institutional structures shaping those experiences. The use of multiple qualitative methods allowed for a layered and contextually grounded examination of food, culture, and belonging as they are experienced in everyday campus life. Attention to reflexivity and analytic rigor supported an interpretive approach that remained responsive to participants' narratives.

The following chapter turns to students' individual accounts to examine how food experiences were described, felt, and interpreted. Drawing on interview data, it explores daily dining routines, emotional responses to campus food environments, and students' reflections on access to Korean food. These narratives illuminate how food functioned as a site of comfort, frustration, memory, and meaning within the institutional context. Taken together, these accounts begin to show how campus dining practices shape students' experiences of belonging and care in higher education.

Chapter 4: Individual Interviews

The interviews often began the same way. A tentative knock. The participant stepping in, slightly nervous, looking around the room before settling into a chair. Guided by the cultural values my Korean mother instilled in me, I greeted each participant by offering snacks. My 엄마's (umma/ mother's) teaching was that food opens people up. And it did. The students' faces would change when they saw the spread: cans of Milkis (a carbonated milk soda), Oh Yes (packaged cubes of chocolate cake layered with cream), Choco Pie (chocolate-coated marshmallow cake snacks). We would talk about favorite snacks, trade tips on where to find them in town, and somewhere in that conversation the room would loosen. The formal interview gave way to something closer to Suda, a Korean relational practice centered on informal, comfortable conversation (Meacham et al., 2022). That simple moment of shared culture and care, I later noted in my research journal, was the emotional baseline for the hours of deep conversation that followed.

The interviews were conducted in English, with frequent translanguaging⁷ into Korean when the flow of conversation called for it. As interviews progressed, the initial reserve gave way to candor. Students shared things they described as private concerns, feelings about food and home they had not previously put into words in a formal setting. Many stayed well past the end of the interview just to keep talking. Several followed up with emails expressing gratitude, and a few mentioned the strangeness of how good it felt to discuss Korean food in a research office on campus.

⁷ Translanguaging refers to the fluid practice through which multilingual speakers draw on their full linguistic repertoire, rather than separating languages into rigid boundaries, to make meaning, express identity, and communicate effectively (García et al., 2021; J. K. Jung et al., 2026)

This chapter presents findings from sixteen individual, semi-structured interviews with Korean American undergraduates at Uri University (pseudonym). Participants ranged from first-year to fourth-year students and represented first-generation, 1.5-generation, and second-generation immigrant backgrounds. A multi-step analytic process identified five core themes: (1) The Dining Hall Landscape: Menu Observations and Physical Environment; (2) White Normativity as the Institutional Default; (3) The Inauthenticity of the “Korean” Food; (4) Emotional Hunger (*애/가/짐*, *Heogijim*); and (5) Internalized Deservingness and Minimal Effort. Together, these themes describe what the daily experience of eating on campus looked and felt like for Korean American students at Uri University.

The Dining Hall Landscape: Menu Observations and Physical Environment

Student interview accounts do not exist in a vacuum. To understand what participants were navigating, it helps to first describe the dining environment itself. As part of this study, I documented dining hall menus and physical spaces at Uri University from March through June, tracking daily offerings across the three residential dining commons open to students with a meal plan. For the purposes of institutional anonymity, I refer to these locations as Dining Commons A, Dining Commons B, and Dining Commons C. The fourth location, Dining hall D, operates exclusively as a takeout facility with a separate menu and is not the focus of this section. What follows draws on the documentation of the dining hall menus at Dining Commons A to C as documented from March 2025 to June 2025, and of physical visits made to the halls during Late May to June 2025.

Each of the three commons with dining-in options has a distinct physical character. Dining Commons A is a large, naturally lit facility with multiple platform stations fanning out from a central Woodstone wood-fired pizza oven. It is the first thing visitors see upon

entering. Dining Commons B follows a “just in time” production approach, preparing seasonal items in smaller batches to keep food fresh, and opens onto a patio with views of the campus lagoon. Dining Commons C is a newer building with floor-to-ceiling windows and open kitchen stations where made-to-order items are prepared in front of diners; the dining program there carries an explicit emphasis on plant-forward options. All three commons organize their menus around a distinction between standard offerings and rotating or specialty offerings. The standard items are available every day at every meal: a deli station with cold sandwiches, wraps, and salads; a pizza or pasta station; a grill with burgers and hot sandwiches; a salad bar; a soup station. These items do not change. Dining Commons A’s pizza station, anchored by the Woodstone oven, is particularly consistent. Dining Commons C has a sushi station that operates daily, making it the only commons with a dedicated Asian food offering available every day. The sushi selection, however, is fairly narrow, with similar options being offered almost each day. There are sometimes chopsticks by the station, but they were not observed two of the three times that I visited the Dining Commons C.

The rotating menu is where day-to-day variation occurs. Each Commons cycles through a set of specialty dishes that change with each meal service and follow no fixed or predictable schedule. Menus collected across the quarter show rotating items spanning a wide range of cuisines: on a given day one commons might offer Thai basil beef, Hawaiian chicken stir-fry, or Vietnamese pork, while another features roasted chicken, pasta bakes, or seasonal vegetables. How these dishes are organized within the dining space, though, follows a consistent pattern worth examining. I was able to collect the menus that were posted for each of the dining halls each day through the on-line dining university dining hall website,

however, and observed how they were organized within the dining space, which follows a consistent pattern worth examining.

The menus and station labels at Uri University's dining commons employ a loose categorical system in which certain cuisines are grouped under a station name rather than a cuisine label. Pizza goes to the pizza station. Sandwiches go to the deli. Any dish that reads as remotely Asian, regardless of its specific national origin, tends to be routed to the Mongolian Grill station. Over the course of the observation period, this station served Vietnamese pork, Hawaiian chicken stir-fry, Thai basil beef, and various stir-fried vegetables, none of which are Mongolian dishes. At the same time, items with an arguably similar "international" character but European or Latin American origins tend to be placed in other stations without a comparable catch-all label. One representative example: a Vietnamese pork banh mi appeared on the rotating menu and was placed in the European station, while on other days, Vietnamese-style pork stir-fry was served at the Mongolian Grill. The organizing principle appears to be one of visual or perceived "Asian-ness" rather than culinary accuracy.

When the menus refer to an "International" section or station, the items in that section are overwhelmingly, and often exclusively, Asian dishes. A sampling of International station offerings across the observation period included Thai basil beef, sushi rolls, teriyaki salmon, and Korean-style chicken. In the documented menus, Asian cuisines comprised the substantial majority of dishes labeled "international," with Latin American, African, and Middle Eastern cuisines appearing only occasionally. European-derived dishes rarely, if ever, appeared under the "International" designation, despite being equally international in origin. The practical effect of this labeling is that Asian cuisines are systematically marked as

“other”: interesting, special, and occasional. Western European-derived food, by contrast, is presented as the neutral, always-available default. The contrast in consistency was sharp. American staples appeared at every meal, every day, across all three commons. Rotating Asian options followed no predictable schedule. There was no reliable day of the week or meal period on which any particular dish would appear. Dining Commons B might offer Thai basil beef at the Mongolian Grill one day; the next, that station might feature a BBQ pork stir-fry, or a pasta dish entirely. A student hoping to find culturally familiar food had no way of knowing whether any would be available on a given day without checking the menu in advance.

Taken together, this structural picture provides the material backdrop for understanding the student experiences described in the sections that follow. The persistence of American staples, the catch-all framing of the Mongolian Grill, the conflation of “international” with “Asian,” and the unpredictability of rotating Asian offerings were not incidental features. They were embedded in the organizational logic of the dining system itself.

The Institutional Default: White Normativity

Research on educational institutions has established that food availability is not a politically neutral undertaking (Levine, 2010; Weaver-Hightower, 2011, 2022). The menu observations above document a consistent structure at Uri University in which Western and American food occupied the reliable center while Asian cuisines were positioned as rotating and occasional. The student accounts in this section describe how that structure was experienced day to day. Participants' descriptions of their food choices reveal how the

consistent availability of some foods and the inconsistency of others shaped their eating habits across the academic year.

Dominance of White/Western Food Norms. Students described two approaches to deciding where to eat each day. Some scanned menus in advance looking for something appealing; others simply went to whichever commons was closest to class or the library. Either way, most began by checking the rotating daily specials, hoping to find something with Asian flavors. However, this search often led back to the standard institutional default: pizza, pasta, sandwiches, and burgers. As Zee, a first-year student living on campus, shared, he typically eats things like pizza, pasta, or sandwiches because they are "usually pretty decent at least" compared to options such as Asian stir-fries, which he described as "very bad," citing their bland flavor and thick, watery sauces as particular problems.

Most participants reported eating pizza and pasta far more often than they preferred. Peach, a first-year, second-generation student living on campus, laid out her daily process: "I usually go for the International area first and see what it looks like. If that doesn't look appealing, then by default, it's usually like the pizza, pasta, or salad." As discussed in the earlier description of the dining hall landscape, the International station is where Asian dishes are typically located. Peach had previously explained that she prefers Asian food, a preference reflected in her practice of going to that station first. Yet the structure of the dining commons, where American staples are available every day and Asian options rotate unpredictably, positioned the American staples, which she preferred less, as the guaranteed fallback. In fact, fourteen of the sixteen students interviewed stated that they would choose Asian food given a viable option, and fifteen stated that they missed the Korean food they grew up eating at home.

These patterns marked a profound dietary and cultural shift once students arrived on campus, one that extended well beyond food preference into the structure of daily life itself. Every student interviewed for this study described a significant change in what they were eating. At home, Korean meals structured around 밥 (bap, rice), 국 (guk, soup), and 반찬 (banchan, side dishes) had been the norm, food consumed not just on special occasions but the daily baseline. Jay described growing up eating "mostly traditionally Korean food, usually bap and banchan, lots of guk." Yena said the standard meal at home was always "a soup, some banchan and rice. That was like the standard meal for us." Jina described a household where her mother cooked Korean 가정식 (family-style home food) throughout the week, supplemented by 반찬 her grandmother packed and sent. Jenny, a first-year, 1.5-generation student who lives on campus, estimated that Korean food had made up about 85 percent of what she ate at home, where her mother cooked three Korean meals a day; at Uri University, she put that figure at roughly five or ten percent. Across the other students interviewed, the drop-off was similarly steep: nearly all described eating Korean food rarely or not at all through the dining halls, with frequency ranging from never to once a week at most, the latter only for students like Hana, a second-year 1.5-generation student who had built a personal network of Korean upperclassmen and knew which off-campus spots to seek out. For the majority, the result was a dining environment where rice came out dry and crumbly, banchan was nowhere to be seen, and the closest thing to guk was a rotation of soups that bore little resemblance to the broths they had grown up with. The meals that had constituted the ordinary rhythm of their days at home had been replaced by pasta, pizza, and burgers, which had not been a major daily component of their diet before.

The Emotional and Planning Cost of Invisibility. As the participants repeatedly expressed, the absence of reliable Asian food options was not a passive inconvenience. Finding food they actually wanted to eat required daily planning, and students' accounts were full of the strategies they had developed. Disappointment and frustration appeared consistently in their descriptions. Even then, students said they would settle for any Asian food, even something that was not specifically Korean, but the available options rarely met that bar either. Sandy, a first-year, 2nd generation student living on campus, was direct: she chose pasta over the Asian offerings because "I don't trust the Asian options here." The Asian options that did appear tended to be Chinese-style dishes, consistent with the menu observations showing the Mongolian Grill as a catch-all container for diverse Asian cuisines, and for students from Korean backgrounds those dishes still did not feel like home. Ariel, a third-year student living on campus, said this compounded her sense of not belonging: it "felt like it was just adding onto my unfamiliarness, especially since, like, the majority of the time even the Asian food was only Chinese food. So, I didn't even feel connected with the Asian food." She described how, in her first two years, she was "still guarded" and "needed a little bit of familiarity to feel that hunger cue," meaning that when the menus offered only unfamiliar options, she sometimes found it difficult to motivate herself to eat at all. Seulgi, a fourth-year student who had moved off campus, made a related observation: she said that a lot of the Asian-inspired dishes, Chinese, Thai, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, "all tasted the same," because she suspected "they use the same spices for each of them... the same proportions too." The institutional logic that grouped all Asian cuisines under a single catch-all station appeared to extend to the kitchen as well.

Several students described checking dining hall menus in advance of every meal, calibrating their plans based on what was available that day. Others stocked up on Korean food during weekend visits home, making those trips partly about food. Some reported going home more often than they otherwise would have, because going home meant access to Korean food. Additional strategies included seeking out off-campus restaurants, using Weee! (an online Korean grocery delivery service that several students discovered independently during college), and relying on Korean church communities for access to home-cooked meals. Finding food that felt familiar required planning, money, and coordination.

When these strategies fell short, students retreated to food stored in their dorm rooms. Peach, who said she always checks the international items first but ends up with American food anyway, described becoming "really sick of the American food, like just having to eat pasta and pizza all the time" by the middle of the quarter, at which point she would return to her room and eat the 밥 (bap) she kept there. For LBPYK, a third-year, 1.5-generation student living on campus, his mother packed Korean meals for him to bring back after visits home, a practice that started because the campus food left him feeling unsatisfied. Sandy regularly brought food from home as well, including 라면 (ramyeon, Korean instant noodles) and other packaged staples, relying on them more heavily as the quarter progressed. These meals were eaten alone in dorm rooms rather than in communal dining spaces. The bap that students described eating in their rooms was, in the Korean cultural context these students grew up in, food designed to be shared across a table with family. For many, the lack of culturally sustaining food options had produced not only a change in what they ate but a change in how and with whom they ate it. As further detailed in the next section, the Korean food that did appear in the dining halls brought its own set of disappointments.

The Inauthenticity of the “Korean” Food

When dining halls offered dishes with Korean or Asian labels, most students said they preferred those items over American staples and were glad the food existed. But disappointment with the quality came up consistently. Students described two related concerns: how the food fell short in taste, texture, and preparation, and what that shortfall meant to them.

Critiques of Preparation and Taste. In Korean cuisine, short-grain rice is an absolute staple, essential for eating alongside banchan (side dishes) and soup due to its sticky texture and subtle sweetness. It is such an integral part of the culture that Koreans use a different word for raw rice (쌀, ssal) and cooked rice (밥, bap), and a standard greeting comparable to the English “how are you” is “have you eaten rice yet?” (밥 먹었어요? Bap meok ut uh yo?). Yet the rice from the dining hall emerged as a recurring source of dissatisfaction, in contrast to the more consistent quality of American food items. Some students took issue with the type. Jay, a first-year student living on campus, described wanting short-grain rice but finding only long-grain available, a texture and flavor he had not grown up eating. Others described preparation failures. Zee said the rice was often not fully cooked, “basically inedible” on those occasions. Aidan, a second-year, 1.5-generation student living on campus, described the white rice as “too grainy, yet also too sweet,” and at times “very dry” — and at other times the opposite, “really mushy.” He found the brown rice “slightly overcooked” and “rather mushy” as well. Jina, a first-year student living on campus, described the rice as “really dry” and said it did not have the right 식감 (shikgam, or mouthfeel/texture). In fact, she used the word “푸석푸석한” (puseokpuseokhan), meaning crumbly or dry and falling apart, to describe the food. The absence of properly prepared rice was notable because rice is

not simply one item among many in Korean cuisine: it is the foundation around which the rest of a meal is organized. Jenny put the broader problem plainly: “Everything tastes the same.” Taken together, these accounts suggest that dissatisfaction was not simply about preference, but about inconsistency in preparation and the absence of staple foods prepared in culturally expected ways.

Other students described the university’s other Korean and Asian offerings with similar assessments. Jay described one of the campus dining halls offering 김치 (*kimchi*, spicy pickled vegetables) that appeared on the menu. He said the dining hall had offered it, but “it wasn’t really kimchi.” Sour, yes. But without the fermented quality that defines authentic kimchi. Ariel described the dining hall kimchi in specific sensory terms: it was “very, very crunchy — like romaine lettuce, that texture, like the white part of it.” It had not fermented long enough, she said, and did not have enough gochugaru. “It’s not bad, but it’s not what I was expecting,” she said. “So it was a little bit sad.” She added that she probably would not want to eat it again. Claire, a second-year biopsychology student who had moved off campus, put it bluntly: “it’s not even kimchi.” She said the execution felt like “the bare minimum,” though she believed the school had good intentions. She was also worried about what the school’s version of kimchi might communicate to students who had never tried the real thing. A bad version could leave “a bad first impression” for students who “might not have eaten kimchi at all, or who might not eat kimchi on a daily basis.” In other words, the students described a compound frustration: their culture was rarely visible on campus, and on the occasions it was, the representation was inaccurate. Claire’s worry about first impressions exemplifies that if a student with no prior exposure to kimchi tried the dining hall version and

disliked it, that experience could color how they thought about Korean food going forward, based on a version none of the Korean students recognized as their own.

What stood out was how vividly students remembered these specific dishes, even when the items had appeared months before the interview. The Korean chicken stew and the kimchi came up repeatedly, described with sensory specificity: the appearance, the smell, the feeling of seeing the label, the first bite, and the reaction that followed. These were clearly notable moments, not routine ones. For instance, multiple students mentioned a Korean spicy chicken stew that had appeared once as a rotating special at a dining hall, a dish that none of them could definitively identify as a Korean dish they recognized. Jay described it as having “a taste that just wasn’t right.” Barbara, a second-year student living on campus, described feeling “really excited” when she saw it on the menu. The excitement did not last. She felt it might not have used any Korean ingredients. It “didn’t taste Korean.” Yena, a first-year student living on campus, said she was not sure which Korean dish it was supposed to represent, but noted the dining hall labeled it “Korean chicken.” Jenny, who recognized the dish as a version of 닭볶음탕 (Dak bok eum tang/ spicy braised chicken), described it as tasting like “고추가루 in water,” (translation: chili flake powder in water), further describing the chicken cut was wrong and the flavor was far from the original. For Sandy, however, simply the fact that it was labeled Korean was enough to make her decide to try it, despite her usual caution about unfamiliar foods. Sandy also described a separate Korean BBQ chicken that had appeared at the to-go-only dining commons, which she expected might resemble the fried Korean chicken chains she grew up with. Instead, she found the kitchen had “just smothered gochujang like BBQ sauce” over a piece of steamed chicken. After one bite she decided it was “terrible.” What struck her was the category confusion. She explained

that Koreans say “BBQ chicken,” they typically mean the crispy, sauced fried chicken that is central to Korean dining culture, and a steamed or boiled piece of protein coated in chili paste is something else entirely.

Seeing a familiar label raised expectations. When the food fell short, the letdown could be sharper than finding nothing at all. Ariel described it: “It’s like, you see Korean chicken on the menu, or you see kimchi on the menu, so you expect at least this type of range of taste or flavor. So you’re like, maybe you’re familiar with this, maybe you’d accept this. But it wasn’t [like that] here. Not here.” She said she does not blame the dining hall chefs, who she thinks are “trying their best.” It is still, she said, “disheartening as a first year, second year, trying to find that comfort food and then you’re given this.” Several other students described the same dynamic, that the label raised their expectations, and that the actual food served did not meet these expectations.

“Korean Food Catered for an American.” For some students, the inaccurate food signaled something about who the dining hall was designed to serve. David, a second-year student who moved off campus after his first year, said the inaccurate Korean food read to him as a message about who campus dining was built around. “It feels like the dining hall is designed for a specific kind of student, and it’s not me,” he said. Barbara described a similar dynamic, suggesting that the Korean food in the dining halls felt like chefs had “used American ingredients to try to make Korean food, and so it doesn’t taste correct. It doesn’t taste Korean... It’s like Korean food catered for an American.” Jenny observed that the different Asian foods offered on campus “taste the same, even though they call it different things,” adding that the kitchen seemed to “just use the same sauce.” Sandy expected the Korean offerings to feel at least like Korean American food, familiar if imperfect. Instead

they were, as she put it, "Korean in that way that American joints seem to think Korean would taste," characterized by generic sweetness and a surface-level use of Korean spices.

Barbara's phrase "Korean food catered for an American" captures two concerns that recurred across interviews. One was a perceived lack of expertise: the people preparing the food, students felt, did not know how Korean dishes were supposed to taste, what ingredients mattered, or how the preparation worked. The other was a perceived lack of institutional investment in acquiring that knowledge. Students were careful to distinguish between these two concerns. Most did not blame the dining hall workers themselves and instead located the problem at the level of institutional decision-making and resource allocation. Jenny's observation that different Asian cuisines all tasted the same at the dining hall pointed toward a related issue: not just that Korean food was poorly executed, but that the institution appeared to treat all Asian cuisines as interchangeable, reflecting a limited awareness of the culinary diversity within and across Asian cultures. For these students, the quality of the food was inseparable from the sincerity of the institution's commitment to inclusion.

Students also described moments when the institution's efforts, however limited, registered as meaningful precisely because they were so rare. Izzy, a fourth-year Communication student who had moved off campus, appreciated that the dining hall had attempted to include kimchi even though she found the result wanting. She acknowledged that "they could have done better" but said that "the fact that they were trying just made me feel appreciated, like happy. The same with other Asian foods as well. It's like I'm happy that there is an international section." Jay expressed a similar sentiment, describing the experience of seeing food connected to his culture on the menu as the institution communicating something: "when they offer food that are part of my culture, it kind of feels

like they're demonstrating like, 'Oh, you have a place here.'" Jenny described a day when Dining Commons A devoted its entire menu to Japanese cuisine. She and her friends went together and worked their way through roughly ten different dishes, including takoyaki and tonkatsu. When asked what she enjoyed about it, she said simply, "Just the fact that I could eat Asian food for free." Students also reported that a campus event organized by a student organization was catered by a nearby Korean fusion restaurant, one of the only local options with Korean-influenced food. Sandy described seeing the food at that event as "a pleasant surprise," and Jay said it made him feel "a little bit more connected to the people there." Students described these moments with noticeably more energy than they brought to their descriptions of everyday dining, and several recalled them in vivid detail long after they had occurred.

Jenny's framing of the Japanese food day as eating "for free" is also noteworthy. She had paid for her meal plan, and yet culturally familiar Asian food felt like an unexpected gift rather than something she was entitled to. Her language suggests that she had already accepted campus dining's cultural defaults as the boundaries of what her meal plan covered, and had come to understand Korean and other Asian foods as existing outside those boundaries, as something she would need to seek and pay for separately rather than something the institution was responsible for providing. This framing connects to the broader pattern of internalized deservingness discussed throughout this chapter: students did not simply lack access to culturally familiar food; they had internalized the institution's indifference as a reasonable baseline, and experienced any deviation from it as a bonus rather than as a fulfillment of what they had already paid for.

Emotional Hunger (허기짐: Heogijim)

Across the interviews, students described a form of longing they distinguished from ordinary physical hunger. This experience is conceptualized in this study as 허기짐 (Heogijim, Emotional Hunger). The term comes from Jina, a first-year Psychology and Brain Science student living on campus, who used it to describe what Korean food means to her. In Korean, 배고픔 (baegopeum) refers to ordinary hunger, an empty stomach.

허기짐 (Heogijim) carries a deeper meaning: desire, longing, a felt void. As Jina described it, "배고픈건 그냥 일차원적으로 그냥 배가 고픈것 같고, 허기짐은 좀 빈거 같은 느낌? 뭔가 땡긴다는 느낌 있잖아요. 그런거를 채워주는거... like you might be full, but you still crave something, and that's what 채워's the 허기." (Translation: Hunger feels like a one-dimensional emptiness in the stomach, while heogijim feels more like a general void, like something is pulling at you. You might be full, but you still crave something, and that's what satisfies the heogijim.) She said Korean food satisfies this on "a more personal sense," while also reminding her of home. Participants across the interviews described being physically provided for by the meal plan while remaining persistently heogijim, emotionally hungry, for the specific taste, comfort, and restorative care embedded in their home food.

This distinction between physical and emotional sustenance ran through how students described eating on campus. Seulgi, a fourth-year student who had moved off campus, described eating at school as purely functional. She called the meals she ate there "struggle meals," a phrase she defined precisely: "something that is very cheap to make that you are literally only eating because you need to put calories in your body." On nights returning from the library at ten o'clock, she said, she would eat bread and butter because it required no

effort and provided no enjoyment; she just needed to sustain her body before sleeping. She equated school food with struggle food: you "really wouldn't eat it if you didn't have to." Yena, a first-year student living on campus, described a similar transformation. At home, eating was "always like a social thing for me and my family, always like a dinner together." At Uri University, food had become "much more of a means of sustenance, rather than something to enjoy." She no longer ate with anyone; she just ate a meal and went.

Sandy described a particularly acute version of this dynamic. During a two-week illness, she found herself largely unable to eat the dining hall food, which was unappealing under normal circumstances and felt impossible while sick. She described hauling herself to the dining hall in a mask on some days, and simply lying in bed and deciding it was not worth the effort on others. Her mother eventually sent an instant 미역국 (miyeokguk, seaweed soup), a dish commonly eaten when sick in Korea, along with other shelf-stable foods from home. The package arrived after the illness had already stretched on for several difficult days. Sandy said the food her mother sent made her feel taken care of in a way the dining hall had not.

The emotional dimension of this hunger became most visible during moments of stress, illness, or homesickness, when cravings for Korean food intensified and the gap between what was available and what students needed felt sharpest. Jenny described this directly in relation to academic pressure: during midterm season, she said, she finds herself craving spicy food, but because the dining halls do not offer it, she ends up buying spicy chips from the Arbor instead. "Honestly, just doing that makes my stomach hurt," she said, adding that relying on fast food during high-stress periods "doesn't really affect my health in a good way." Sandy, similarly, described eating 불닭라면 (buldak ramyeon/spicy instant

noodle) as "stress relief from exams," a workaround she had set up in her dorm room precisely because the dining hall offered nothing that served the same function. For Jina, the pressure of finals and midterm season produced a different kind of compromise: with no time or energy to seek out anything better, she defaulted to Arbor food or Subway, the most convenient options available, and the least satisfying.

The absence of Korean food did not only surface during high-stress moments, however. It was a persistent background condition that colored how students related to food more generally, and sometimes the act of seeking comfort made the absence feel more acute rather than less. Peach described how eating the 밥 (bap) she kept in her room would make her "feel kind of homesick and wanting to, like, go back home and eat home-cooked meals." The food meant to comfort her sharpened her sense of what was absent. Yena said not having access to Korean food made her "want to go home a little bit more" because she "needed that familiar taste again," adding that it made her want to live "somewhere where that is available. Like, it made me realize, that's not here." Sandy's response was simpler. Asked what she does when she craves a specific Korean dish, she said: "Ignore it, since I can't get it here." She said, for instance, that no place near campus sold 갈비탕 (galbitang, beef bone soup), one of her favorites, leaving this craving constantly unsatisfied. Aidan described the same current of homesickness running through his relationship to food on campus. "Food does play a factor in homesickness for sure," he said. "I'm always thinking about when can I go home." Before each break, he tells his mother which dishes he is looking forward to, a specific baked mackerel prepared the way only she makes it, and he counts down to them. The longing did not disappear even when students found workarounds. Ariel described how, during a period of acute homesickness in her first year, her mother sent care packages with shelf-stable

versions of food from home. The packages helped, but Ariel also felt "self-conscious" eating this food in her dorm room, uncertain how it might be perceived by non-Korean residents on her floor. Even in the privacy of her own space, eating Korean food required a kind of social negotiation.

For Claire, a second-year student who had grown up in the United States with less frequent exposure to Korean culture, the absence of Korean food at college had sharpened her sense of what it meant to her. "Korean food is definitely a way for me to reconnect with my culture," she said, explaining that as a child she had not appreciated it as much, but that as she grew older she had come to understand and value its flavors. It had become her "comfort food," connected to "a lot of good and positive memories" and to the image of her mother making things from scratch. American food, by contrast, did not carry the same personal weight: "it wasn't as personal... no deeper meaning or personal connection." What these accounts share is that the emotional hunger students described was not simply about missing a favorite dish. It was tied to care, memory, cultural identity, and a sense of being known. As the following sub-section describes, this emotional cost also had a physical one.

Physical Consequences of Institutional Food Norms. The effects of having limited access to culturally relevant foods went beyond emotional and also showed up in students' physical experiences. Some lost weight, others gained it. Several described fatigue, nutritional deficiencies, or persistent hunger even after eating. For instance, Sandy, a first-year Computer Science student living on campus, disclosed that in the less than six months since starting at Uri University, she had lost approximately 20 pounds. She attributed this directly to her food situation on campus: "I wasn't trying to lose weight or anything." Because most of the food offered on campus was unappealing to her, she ended up subsisting mostly on

instant 라면 (ramyeon/instant noodle) packets and other food her mother had packed for her, a diet that resulted in a concerning report from the student health center. She shared that her vitamin D levels were found to be “concerningly low” and her iron levels “at the extreme end of low,” and that she had also noticed “a sense of fatigue.” Throughout the interview, she spoke in a soft voice, which echoed her complaints that she felt low energy and physically unwell. The student health center also provided her with a referral to services for Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), a condition characterized by persistent failure to meet nutritional needs. Sandy did not frame this as a medical crisis; she described it in the same soft, matter-of-fact tone she used for most of the interview. But the clinical detail underscored that her food situation had moved beyond inconvenience into a documented concern for her physical health.

Jenny described a different trajectory. At home, her mother cooked three Korean meals a day, which Jenny called “healthy and plant based.” At Uri University she found herself relying on what she called fast food: burgers, pizza, the rotating items. “That’s why I’ve been getting a lot of weight when I came here,” she said. During exam periods, cravings for spicy food went unmet at the dining hall; she bought spicy chips from the campus market instead. She acknowledged this hurt her stomach and did not resolve the craving. For some students, the initial novelty of unrestricted access to American food led to eating patterns that ultimately produced discomfort and weight gain. David shared that at first the experience was exciting: he had grown up in a household where his mother actively limited access to greasy or salty foods, so the abundance and variety of the dining hall felt liberating. He described assembling unconventional meals: filling sandwiches with fries, eating plates composed almost entirely of meat from different stations. Within a relatively brief period, however, he

began to “not feel well” physically. Although he had encountered American food through school lunches and occasional meals with friends, he realized he “didn’t know how to eat American food in a healthy way.” At home, Korean meals structured around rice and *banchan* had provided a nutritional equilibrium that did not require conscious planning. The dining hall presented an abundance of calorie-dense options, and David lacked a culturally familiar framework for eating them in a balanced way. As the menu became repetitive, David found himself feeling hungry even after eating. Physically full was not the same as satisfied. “I just felt kind of *헐전* (*heo jeon*, empty),” he said. “So I would come back from [the dining hall] and eat a ramyeon just a couple of hours again later.” Over the course of his first year, the combination of dining hall meals and late-night ramyeon resulted in significant weight gain.

Several students moved off campus partly because of the food situation. Access to a kitchen was a factor. David, as an example, explicitly stated that he moved off campus with a Korean American roommate so they could cook for themselves. Korean food became a regular part of their diet. “We buy our kimchi from Costco,” he said with a grin. With regular access to kimchi, David had regained his autonomy over eating healthy and in a balanced way, relying on his cultural food knowledge.

Internalized Deservingness and Minimal Effort

Most Korean American students expressed hesitation when discussing the possibility of expecting better options. Even those who had described significant physical and emotional costs tempered their own critiques almost immediately, often expressing for feelings of gratitude for token efforts. This pattern aligns with what scholars of policy and social stratification describe as internalized deservingness. (Schneider & Ingram, 2005), a process

by which groups come to accept limited access to resources as appropriate or inevitable.

Students across the interviews demonstrated a persistent sense that their specific cultural food needs were not something a large, publicly funded institution was obligated to meet.

This pattern showed up in several ways. Students qualified critical observations with rapid acknowledgments of institutional constraint. They invoked their minority status as a reason the institution's limited responsiveness was understandable. They expressed gratitude for efforts they had just described as inadequate. When disappointed, they tended not to say anything, even when family or peers encouraged them to. David's account captures this dynamic clearly. After stating the previously mentioned statement that he feels the dining halls are "designed for a specific kind of student, and it's not me," he quickly added: "I understand, though, that they have to serve the masses, and maybe there aren't enough Asian students here. I appreciate that they at least try, even if it's not always right." David's instinct to cushion his own critique with gratitude, even after articulating a clear sense of exclusion, was not an isolated response but a pattern that repeated, in slightly different forms, across nearly every interview.

Even Sandy, who had lost twenty pounds within eight months of living on campus and whose health indicators had become clinically concerning, framed the dining hall's limited offerings in terms of demographic logic. Barbara, a second-year student living on campus, expressed this pattern even more explicitly. Reflecting on the limited Korean food at the dining halls, she reasoned: "Koreans are definitely like a minority here, maybe even within the Asian people... So that kind of does affect the supply too." She had come to accept that the institution was "trying to cater to the masses," and while she said they should "try harder," she immediately qualified it: "I know it's not really that feasible." She also

noted that she personally did not feel she would be “directly impacted” by their limited effort — not because she had what she needed, but because she had already calibrated her expectations to match the institution’s offerings. Sandy similarly framed the hall’s limited offerings in demographic logic: “Koreans are definitely like a minority here, maybe even within the Asian people. I feel like there are not as many of us as there are Chinese Americans or Taiwanese Americans... So that kind of does affect the supply too.” Jina expressed that she felt surprised when she saw menu items labeled as Korean dishes, “because this is such a PWI, so I didn’t expect Korean food to be here.” When she tried it and found it recognizable, she felt genuinely happy: “Like in terms of representation, I lowkey think... just by some people who didn’t know it, would try it and think ‘oh, delicious!’ I think I felt happy as a Korean person, like, 어, 우리 음식이야! (translation: that’s right, that’s our food!) that kind of feeling.” The range across these two accounts is notable. Sandy accepted a limited menu as a demographic given, while Jina found unexpected pleasure in simply being acknowledged at all. Both responses reflect how low the baseline expectation had become.

Minimal Effort as Institutional Strategy. Students often described the university’s efforts in terms of “minimal effort.” They recognized that serving a single, inauthentic dish infrequently was not a genuine expression of institutional care. Several also noted that even minimal acknowledgment felt meaningful given how rare it was, and that asking for more felt presumptuous. Claire, a second-year student who now lives off campus, described the deep personal value attached to Korean food and the way its near-absence shaped her experience at Uri University: “Korean food is definitely a way for me to reconnect with my culture, especially because I feel like, growing up in the US, I wasn’t really exposed to the

Korean culture as much. So it's a way for me to kind of appreciate my heritage and culture." She explained that as a child she didn't enjoy Korean food as much, but that as she'd gotten older she had come to "understand and appreciate the flavor" more. It had become, she said, her "comfort food," associated with positive memories and the feeling of home.

Peach similarly noted that if Korean food were offered on campus, "that would definitely help with feeling like my culture is integrated into Uri University." Jenny expressed a related dimension of this: when asked how she would feel if the dining halls offered good Asian or Korean food, she described it as a transformation of her relationship to campus dining entirely. "I would appreciate it a lot more," she said, "and I would more happily go to dining halls, instead of forcing myself to go there just because I'm hungry. Like, I would actually go there because I want to eat the food." The distinction she drew, going because she wanted to versus going because she had to, came up in various forms across the interviews. Seulgi articulated what this relationship to food meant at a deeper level. Korean food was, for her, "one of the biggest ways that I've been really able to consistently keep in touch with my heritage." When she felt she had lost fluency in Korean, food became a continuous thread. "I could still eat this kimchi jjigae," she said. "Some people don't even know what that is. So it's like, okay, let me at least have this." She described Korean food as something she was confident would travel with her — wherever she ended up in the world, in whatever season of her life, she could always make kimchi jjigae and eat it. For Jina, the food environment reinforced something she already felt everywhere else on campus. "Whenever I walk around campus," she said, "I see a lot of white people. I see barely Korean, or especially Asian, but especially Korean. So I feel like just what I see in general already kind of reminds me of how I'm very minor. But then if I

look at the food option, I think it just re-emphasizes that, yeah, my representation here is very, very minor.” Students understood what was missing. As described in the next section, that understanding rarely became a demand for change.

Student Agency and the Path to Gimbap Chats

One common trait found in the stories shared by most of the students interviewed for this study was that they did not simply adapt to the dining environment but actively found ways around it to secure a better food environment for themselves. Getting Korean food required effort, money, and coordination, and most students developed their own strategies. These included going home more frequently to stock up on Korean food, driving down to the nearest Koreatown (approximately two hours away by car) to buy groceries or eat at Korean restaurants, and utilizing Weee!, an online Asian grocery and food delivery service, which most students had not encountered before college and found through word of mouth from other Korean American students. Several students also found community by joining Korean church groups, where they often formed friendships with older Korean students, called *sunbaes* in Korean, who could cook Korean food for the group. Others moved off campus specifically to gain access to a kitchen.

Students also traded informal knowledge about where to find Korean food. That the sushi station at Dining Commons C features Korean dishes alongside Japanese ones, for example, was something several students stated that they learned through word of mouth rather than any official channel. When asked how she found out about places where Korean food is available, Hana, a second-year, 1.5-generation pre-biology student living on campus, described learning through rumors, through the Korean Student Club, and through the way Korean students naturally shared information with each other: “소문으로 알겠됐고 그리고

KSC 에 그, 한국 사람들이 많으니까 그 사람들 이렇게 한국음식을 crave 하잖아요, 그러니까 아 나 여기 가봤는데 이게 맛있고 이걸 별로 였다 막 이런거 막 아르켜주시니까” (Translation: I heard through rumors and through KSC. Since there are a lot of Korean people there and they all crave Korean food, they share tips: ‘I went here and this was good but that wasn’t.’). Similarly, She also described how her involvement with KSC had connected her to a network of older Korean students living off campus who cooked Korean food regularly. When she craved Korean food and could not find it elsewhere, she would go to their apartments and ask them to cook for her. Jina described a comparable experience through her KSC connections. On one occasion, she recalled, a KSC member who cooked hosted a gathering: “그냥 진짜 날 잡고 애들이랑 다 같이 모여서 먹고 놀자, so we all sent him a little bit of money so that he can buy some stuff, so he went to Costco, and we bought pork and kimchi and stuff like that, 그래서 집에서 보쌈도 해먹었어요” (Translation: we just set a date and all gathered to eat and hang out together, so we made boiled pork dish bossam at home). The communal meal happened not in a dining hall or a restaurant but in a private apartment, organized entirely through a student network. For Jenny, this social network built around food was a primary source of both nourishment and belonging. Barbara reflected on the social dimension of this. Eating together, even in difficult food circumstances, created shared experience. If the food was good, people connected over that. If it was bad, she noted, “you can still connect over like, oh, the menu’s so bad today. And in a way, that’s the form of bonding.” What these networks made visible was something the institution had not provided: a system, built entirely by students, for finding, sharing, and eating culturally familiar food together.

Meanwhile, other students adapted by expanding their access points to food. For instance, Jenny's move to an apartment in Isla Vista for her second year was not primarily about food, she said. But living off campus would let her shop for Asian groceries freely. "Since I don't have to rely on dining hall food now, I can more freely shop for Asian food when I go grocery shopping at Trader Joe's or Costco," she said, describing that prospect as something that made her "happier, honestly." David also mentioned the reliance on Korean clubs to build his knowledge about Korean food, noting that he met his current roommate at the Korean American Student Club (KASC, pseudonym), and that he learned how to order from Weee! through that organization.

This connection between Korean student organizations and food access extended beyond informal networks. During the course of this study, I attended a KASC meeting on campus where the organization hosted a food-making event sponsored by Weee. The sponsorship had provided ingredients and a preparation guide, which the student leadership had used to make Korean dishes to share with attendees, including japchae. The room was full of Asian American students, not all of whom were Korean American, and the food was met with visible excitement. The event illustrated something that came up across the interviews: Korean student organizations were functioning not only as social spaces but as one of the few consistent sites on campus where Korean food was available, prepared with care, and shared communally.

Institutional Response at the Margins

An Institutional Effort. The patterns students described, such as persistent heogijim, physical health consequences, elaborate workarounds, did not go entirely unnoticed on

campus. Staff at the Student Wellness Center (SWC)⁸, Uri University's health and wellness department, had arrived at many of the same conclusions independently, and had spent several years building programming designed to address exactly the gap students identified. Their account offers both corroboration of student findings and a revealing portrait of what institutional responsiveness to those findings actually looks like in practice.

The SWC's Food, Nutrition, and Basic Skills (FNBS) program had evolved from a food security initiative into something considerably more culturally oriented, largely through the work of students themselves. Laurel, the lead intern who had been with the program for two years, described surveying over 300 students about their relationship to cultural food access on campus. What she found confirmed what students in this study described: a pervasive sense of homesickness tied directly to the absence of culturally familiar food, and a strong desire for cooking spaces where that absence could be addressed. Using her survey data alongside a literature review on cultural food and belonging, she secured a UC Office of the President equity and mental health grant, which funded a workshop series called Pass the Plate, a set of hands-on cooking classes built around cultural recipes, developed in partnership with campus organizations including the food bank, the African Diasporic Cultural Resource Center, the Black Student Union, and a Filipino student organization. The series consistently filled to capacity, with waitlists for every session. Deegan, an intern who helped run the workshops, said the cultural food events were "the most popular, by far."

Sage, the program's assistant coordinator, described arriving at this work through her own cultural background. Her mother is from Taiwan, and she said she "knew that food always has a very special way of bringing you home." She recounted a story that had shaped

⁸ The department name, as well as the names of all employees and interns, are pseudonyms

much of the program's subsequent direction. During a cooking class she taught, a student who had recently arrived from Taiwan stayed late to take home extra rice. Sage later learned that the student had shipped her rice cooker from home in her suitcase, that the suitcase was lost in transit, and that she had gone three weeks without rice. For a Taiwanese student, Sage said, rice is "an absolute staple." Rather than express her situation to receive help, the student had chosen to stay after class in an effort to secure food for herself. Sage described the moment as "heartbreaking, in a little bit of a way, something so simple," and said it had pushed a lot of the program's work in the years since. The story illustrates precisely what students in this study described: a need so basic and so unmet that it went largely unspoken, visible only in small, persistent acts.

In addition, the program's health educator Juniper, articulated what the SWC had come to understand about the relationship between cultural food and student wellness, and also named the institutional resistance that limited the program's reach. She described pushing back against what she called "the white wellness space, of like, here's a salad, and this is healthy," arguing that the program needed to show students that culturally relevant foods are also nutritious, and that health literacy looks different depending on what food traditions you grew up in. This observation directly mirrors what students in this study described: a sense that the food available to them was not only culturally foreign but also structurally positioned as the default definition of a healthy meal. When the researcher noted that students had described not knowing how to eat healthily on campus because none of the available ingredients matched what they were used to, Juniper recognized it immediately.

Yet the program operated at the margins of the institution's priorities. All of its cooking classes were pop-up events, constrained by the electrical capacity of borrowed

rooms. At maximum, the program could accommodate five students per burner. A dedicated teaching kitchen had been pursued for years and repeatedly denied, blocked by earthquake safety codes in Isla Vista, competing claims on campus spaces, and administrative indifference. Juniper was direct about the institutional attitude: "food is still seen very much as a fun thing, not a need or a basic health right, even though we're still being funded by basic needs." She described the response from some campus leadership as dismissive, "you're just making tacos, anyone can make tacos," reflecting a failure to recognize, as she put it, what it means to be "an international student coming and truly having no idea what's on the shelves and how to feed themselves." A free weekly rice and beans program, which had drawn up to 100 students per week with each iteration featuring a different cultural tradition, was discontinued by environmental health and safety regulations. The program had too many partners requesting collaboration and too little capacity to respond. The demand, as the SWC staff described it, was not the problem. The institution was.

What the SWC's account makes clear is that the student experiences documented in this study were not invisible to everyone on campus. They were visible to the people who had gone looking for them, and those people were interns and a two-person staff operating on a grant, in borrowed rooms, at electrical capacity. The institution had, in a sense, outsourced its responsiveness to cultural food needs to an underfunded student affairs program, and then declined to provide that program with the space or resources to meet the demand it had identified. The gap between what students needed and what the institution provided was a structural condition, one that the SWC's work made legible through their efforts.

Student-Built Community: The Korean Student Association

The SWC represented one form of response to the gap students described, institutional in origin but driven largely by student initiative and operating at the margins of the institution's priorities. The Korean Student Association represented another: a structure built entirely by students, outside any institutional mandate, with no dedicated space, no guaranteed funding, and no administrative support. Where the SWC made the gap legible to the institution, the Korean Student Club⁹ simply worked around it. The student networks documented throughout this chapter were not simply informal workarounds; they were, in aggregate, the beginnings of an alternative infrastructure, one built by students, for students, to address a need the institution had not met.

Rina is a third-year international student from Korea, and the only continuous member of the KSC across three years. She had joined as a first-year intern, become event team captain in her second year, and assumed the presidency in her third, largely by default, she said, because everyone else had graduated, transferred, or left for mandatory military service. She described her first year at Uri University as disorienting: her English, while functional, was not conversational in the way she needed it to be, and the campus offered almost nothing she recognized as familiar. The KSC, she said, was where that changed. It introduced her to local Korean restaurants, connected her to older students who could help her navigate the institution, and gave her a space where she could simply speak Korean. "I wanted to be somewhere that I can be myself," she said, "just a Korean girl who actually

⁹ The student organization names and member names, including the club president interviewed, are pseudonyms.

never been to the US." Her motivation for sustaining and eventually leading the organization came from that experience: she wanted to make it available to others.

Food was central to how the KSC built and maintained community. Rina described meal time as the primary socializing window for the organization, the one moment outside of structured events and study sessions when members could connect without the formality of a meeting. "Except the 밥 먹는 시간(*bapmeokneunseegan*)," she said, using the Korean term for meal time, which also translates literally to time for eating ride. "They [the students] actually do their own thing. They study or they do their own thing. So the 밥 먹는 시간 (*bapmeokneunseegan*) is, I think, the most kind of socializing KSC thing." Meals were less formal, more personal, and conducted in Korean, which shifted the register of the entire interaction. In support of her opinion of meal times, Rina described learning during a meal that a staff member had been afraid to talk to her because of how she had appeared at a party, focused and composed while managing the logistics of a large event. The conversation that demystified her would not have happened in a meeting. It happened over food. "That kind of 밥 먹는 시간(*bapmeokneunseegan*)" she reflected, "is having a socializing time with someone who wasn't even friendly, and then actually can make a friend."

Eating Korean food together amplified this effect further. Rina described how sharing a meal at a Korean restaurant opened up a particular kind of conversation, one organized around personal memory and family experience. She gave the example of 김치찌개 (*kimchi jjigae*/ spicy stew made with kimchi, fermented vegetables commonly consumed in Korea). At a meal, one person might mention that their grandmother made kimchi jjigae a certain way, another might compare it to a version they knew, and through that exchange something private and culturally specific became shared. "We can talk about how my grandmother

makes kimchi jjigae and that kimchi jjigae is so good, that kind of stuff. Like, the kinds of experience that we had in Korea, or maybe their parents had in Korea," she said, noting that about half of KSC's members are Korean American, students whose parents are Korean but who grew up in the United States. The kimchi jjigae conversation worked across that generational difference, she explained, because it gave students something in common that was personal rather than institutional. It was not an icebreaker exercise. It was a real conversation made possible by the food in front of them.

The KSC also undertook organized efforts to bring Korean food to the broader campus community. The most significant of these was a cup bap fundraiser, Korean rice bowls with 불고기 (bulgogi/marinated beef), spam mayo, or tuna mayo toppings, that the organization sold over two consecutive days to recover from a serious debt. The debt itself reveals something important about the structural position of small, minority-serving student organizations. During the year, the KSC had hosted a resume workshop in collaboration with an outside organization. They had not known that renting a university projector would cost over a hundred dollars charged automatically to their account. Combined with the cost of a collaborative party with the Japanese Student Club and the Taiwanese Student Club, the KSC ended the quarter more than several hundred dollars in debt, much of it covered personally by Rina out of her own funds. "We didn't know," she said, describing the automatic charge. "And we were just like, ‘돌려주세요! 우리 돈 없어요!’” (translation: Please return it to us! We don't have the money!). The incident illustrates what scholars of organizational inequality describe as an institutional knowledge gap: the procedures, costs, and administrative expectations that larger, more established organizations navigate fluently are invisible to smaller organizations until they become financial crises.

The recovery effort was the 컵밥(cup bap/ rice bowls) sale. Staff woke at six in the morning, split into two groups at two different apartments, cooked the bulgogi and prepared the rice, and were selling by eleven. Both days sold out, twenty-five cups each day, within a few hours, earning roughly \$400 in total and returning the KSC to a modest surplus. Rina had pushed for the sale to feature Korean food over the objections of some staff who doubted it would attract non-Korean buyers. The final customer base was mostly Asian, with Korean church community members and Chinese and Mexican students also purchasing. The food, she said, was the most legitimate Korean food she had eaten at Uri University. "I also ate that one," she said. "I bought one, and it was so delicious." What the cup bap sale demonstrated, beyond the financial recovery, was that Korean food made by Koreans, for a campus that had almost none of it, drew a crowd. The demand was there. And in order to meet this demand, students were willing to wake at six in the morning and cook in their apartments. However, what was absent was any institutional infrastructure to support or sustain that effort. The KSC operated without a kitchen, without a budget, and without the kind of organizational knowledge that would have told them, before the workshop, what a projector rental would cost. They improvised, they absorbed the losses personally, and they built what they could. The cup bap sale, like the dorm room banchan, the Costco bossam run, and the informal restaurant networks, was a student solution to an institutional absence, one that was generative, community-building, and entirely unsupported.

What these accounts share, taken together, is a portrait of Korean students at Uri University doing the work of cultural sustenance themselves, in the spaces the institution had not filled, with the resources they could assemble. For Rina, the KSC was the place where a first-year student from Korea could speak her own language, eat food she recognized, and

find the particular comfort of being, as she put it, just herself. For the Korean American students in the organization, it was a space to access a cultural identity they knew they had but had few structured opportunities to inhabit. For all of them, food was the medium through which that project happened. That students built this infrastructure at all, with no kitchen, no reliable budget, and no institutional roadmap, speaks to a remarkable capacity for resourcefulness and care, a determination to create belonging where the institution had not thought to provide it.

From Individual Accounts to Collective Space

The accounts gathered across these sixteen interviews describe a campus food environment that Korean American students navigated largely on their own terms, and largely without institutional support. The daily experience of eating was shaped by menus centered on American staples, Asian food that rotated unpredictably and arrived inaccurately, and a category system that treated all Asian cuisines as interchangeable. Students found ways around those conditions: stocking dorm rooms, going home more often, building informal knowledge networks, forming relationships through Korean student organizations, and eventually, for many, moving off campus. These strategies shared a common logic; they were ways of creating access to food and community that the institution had not provided. The following chapter turns to a different register of these same experiences. Where the interviews surfaced individual accounts of navigating campus food, the gimhap chat offered a communal space in which those experiences were shared, compared, and processed together. The shift from individual interview to collective conversation brought with it new interactions, unexpected connections, and a different quality of reflection on what it means to eat, and to belong, at Uri University.

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Chapter 5: Gimbap Chat

In the dining hall, I had watched students eat alone. Tray set down, headphones in, phone propped against a water bottle, fork moving without much thought. The room was full and yet somehow several occupied tables felt quiet. Many students sat within feet of each other and did not speak. The food on their trays, whatever rotation the dining hall was offering that week, disappeared efficiently, purposelessly, the way food does when eating is only about finishing.

The room I borrowed for the gimbap chat always ended up smelling like rice. Not the faint, institutional smell of large quantities of boiled rice sitting on a warming tray, but the full, close warmth of rice that has just finished cooking in a rice cooker, the kind that fills a small space and stays there. Around the table, students who had introduced themselves less than an hour ago were laughing. Someone held up a gimbap roll that had come apart at one end, rice escaping from the seaweed, and announced that hers was the ugliest one on the table. Another person immediately disagreed, holding up her own misshapen roll as evidence. A third said she had already eaten more pieces than she could count but was already planning her next roll, because an ugly one was basically an excuse to try again. The laughter that followed was easy and unguarded. These students were not yet friends, exactly, but they were something. In the sweet-smelling air of that small room, passing rice and sesame oil across a shared table, they had become people who laughed together, which is not nothing. Which is, in fact, quite a lot.

These were the gimbap chats.

Cooking Together, Suda'ing Together

The previous chapter examined how Korean American undergraduate students described their food experiences through individual, semi-structured interviews. Those accounts illuminated the texture of daily life in campus dining halls: the rice that never quite tastes right, the longing for foods that carry memory and meaning, the work of navigating an institutional food system that was not designed with them in mind. This chapter turns to the second major source of data in this study: the gimhap chats.

The gimhap chats were three group sessions in which student participants made and ate gimhap together, talked, and lingered. The first session, held in early May, included five participants. The second, later that same month, included two participants due to scheduling conflicts. The third, at the end of May, included four participants. They were not focus groups in the conventional sense. They did not follow a structured protocol or move systematically through a predetermined set of questions. They were designed, instead, to reflect Suda in its fullest expression: open, relational, unhurried, and shaped by what participants brought to the conversation rather than what I directed them toward (Meacham et al., 2022). Food preparation was not incidental to this design. It was structural. The act of rolling gimhap together gave participants something to do with their hands, made silence comfortable rather than awkward, and created natural entry points into conversation that no prompt could reliably replicate.

A note on attribution is warranted before proceeding. Unlike the individual interview data analyzed in the previous chapter, the gimhap chats were group settings in which students often shared more personal and spontaneous disclosures than what they shared during the one-on-one interviews they previously participated in. Because these disclosures emerged in

a collective context and frequently built on what others were saying, I have chosen not to attribute specific statements to named participants in this chapter. Instead, findings are presented collectively, drawing on patterns and exchanges across all three sessions. Where direct quotations appear, they are identified by session number only. This approach reflects my commitment to protecting the relational and sometimes vulnerable nature of what students shared in these gatherings.

In this chapter, I make two interconnected arguments. The first is empirical. The themes that emerged in the gimbap chats largely echoed those from the individual interviews: the inadequacy of campus dining, the cultural weight of Korean food, the experience of homesickness, the relationship between food and belonging. The collective format, however, changed the register of how students expressed these themes. Students spoke with greater ease, more humor, and more directly about their feelings regarding Korean food in the presence of peers than they had alone with a researcher. Critiques that may have been softened or statements that were hedged in individual interviews became collective naming. Private experiences that students had carried as personal grievances became, in the group setting, shared ones. Consequently, as I will discuss in depth in this chapter, I was able to understand more about the intensity of food-related experiences for the students.

The second argument is methodological. The gimbap chat format produced conditions for a kind of collective, embodied knowledge that was distinct from the individual interviews. Conversation that happened alongside food preparation was qualitatively different from the individual interviews or from group conversations that happened without the activity of rolling gimbap. At first, participants sat around making perfunctory small talk about exams or the weather, with their bodies mostly oriented toward me, the researcher. The

moment we started rolling gimbap together, however, our bodies faced each other more like a circle, and conversations quickly became deeper. No one rushed to fill the silences between exchanges, as the shared activity and rhythms of rolling and passing ingredients filled the space with comfort. In this chapter, I argue that Suda-informed, food-centered methods generate a specific form of relational knowledge (Meacham et al., 2022), and that the gimbap chat, as a method developed for this study, represents a contribution to how qualitative researchers across disciplines might think about data collection as an act of care rather than extraction (Patel, 2015b; Tuck & Yang, 2013).

The sections that follow each carry a distinct analytical purpose. Section one examines how the physical activity of rolling gimbap together created the methodological conditions for the conversations that followed, attending to the dynamics of shared activity, lateral conversation, and researcher posture. Section two examines how themes from the individual interviews were expressed differently in the group setting, focusing on what the collective format changed about how students spoke. Section three examines what gimbap specifically, as a culturally Korean food item with its own history of labor and care, contributed to the relational quality of each session. In section four, I turn to what the sessions produced beyond the conversation itself: the temporary communities that formed, what participants said about the experience in retrospect, and what the format made possible in ways that extended past the formal endpoint of each gathering. In section five, I present the reflexive notes on what this method asked of me as a researcher, and what I would do differently in future applications.

Food-Making as Methodological Condition

In each of the three gimbap chat sessions, the first few moments began with a degree of expected awkwardness. Students arrived at different times, signed consent forms, made name tags, and settled into an unfamiliar space without much conversation. After introductions and a brief demonstration of how to roll gimbap – many students having never made it by themselves before – something shifted. Hands occupied with rice and seaweed, bodies oriented toward a shared task rather than toward me, participants moved into conversation in ways that felt less like responding to questions and more like talking while doing something together. This section examines what that shift made possible and demonstrates how the physical activity of rolling gimbap functioned as the primary methodological condition for the kind of conversation that followed.

The practical work of rolling gimbap created what might be described as productive distraction. Participants had to figure out how much rice to use, which ingredients to choose, how tightly to roll, how to cut without the pieces falling apart. This figuring-out happened collectively, with participants helping each other, sharing tips, laughing at mistakes, and comparing results. The activity gave everyone in the room a shared focus that was low-stakes, hands-on, and absorbing. Because we were all rolling gimbap together at the same table, it was also easier for me to assume the position of fellow participant rather than formal researcher. I was seated alongside students, my hands busy at the same task; our shared orientation toward the food flattened some of the hierarchy that typically structures a research encounter. In session one, one participant mentioned mid-roll that she had only made gimbap once before, while helping her mom. This small disclosure opened a thread of discussion among other students present about how their families made gimbap at home,

which flowed, without any prompting or awkward transition, into broader conversation about what they missed. That sequence was characteristic of how conversation moved across all three sessions: organically, from one thread to the next, following participants' associations rather than my prompts, questions, or predetermined agenda.

In the gimhap chats, the dynamics that researchers have associated with participatory and arts-based methods were evident: silences became part of the rhythm of rolling and passing ingredients rather than uncomfortable breaks in conversation, and conversation tended to emerge laterally among participants rather than directed vertically through me as the researcher (Gauntlett, 2011; Torre et al., 2008). This lateral quality was especially evident in the early portions of each session. Participants addressed each other, built on each other's observations, and introduced topics I had not anticipated, all while their hands were busy. During these stretches, my role was less to ask questions and instead primarily to be present, keep the food coming, and follow threads that participants had already opened among themselves.

Toward the beginning of each session, while participants were still rolling, I also took some time to share a bit of my own story with food and school, and I believe this played a part in the relational scaffolding of each gathering. I described my own relationship to gimhap: how my 엄마 (mom) used to offer to make gimhap for me in high school, how I had declined out of embarrassment about the smell, and how I later brought it to my college roommates and discovered, with some surprise and relief, that they loved it. This story served multiple purposes: it was an icebreaker and also a model of the kind of open conversation the session was designed to invite. Moreover, I had hoped to position myself as someone with my own complicated, affectionate, and sometimes embarrassing relationship to Korean food,

rather than as a neutral facilitator standing outside the experience. In all three sessions, participants responded by offering their own versions of a similar story, describing the first time they shared Korean food with non-Korean friends, the moment they stopped feeling self-conscious about it, and the foods they missed and never told anyone. These disclosures were answers to a story rather than responses to a question, and they reflect what Meacham et al. (2022) describe as the dialogic and relational character of Suda, in which meaning emerges through exchange rather than extraction.

While the lateral, peer-driven conversations, the ease with which participants shared personal disclosures, and the relational quality of each session were consistent across the gimbap chats, not everything about the format functioned as designed. For instance, session two of the gimbap chats were attended by only two participants rather than the intended four due to scheduling conflicts, and the reduced group size altered the character of the conversation in ways worth examining. With two participants, the dynamic shifted from a group encounter toward something closer to a three-way conversation, and my presence as researcher shaped the exchange more heavily than it had in the larger sessions. During the first twenty minutes, I found it necessary to ask more direct questions to open conversational threads, including prompts about foods students ate at home and their experiences in the dining halls, rather than listening and following what participants raised organically among themselves. As the session progressed and the two participants built rapport with each other, the conversation grew warmer and more substantive, and both participants became noticeably more animated. Nevertheless, the session moved more linearly than the others, and the unexpected tangents, collective recognitions, and peer-to-peer elaborations that characterized sessions one and three were less present, especially at the beginning when I had to still “lead”

the conversation. This pattern suggests that group size is a meaningful variable for this method. The relational conditions that Suda requires, including the absence of hierarchical roles and the development of a shared conversational space among peers, are more difficult to establish when the group is small enough that the researcher's presence dominates the dynamic in ways that resemble an extended individual interview rather than a collective gathering (Meacham et al., 2022).

In sum, the rolling of the gimbap together created a particular quality of social condition in which conversation could emerge laterally among participants, hierarchy was softened by a shared task, and the researcher could participate as a peer rather than a detached observer. Rather than producing conversation directly, these conditions established the structural preconditions that made a different kind of conversation possible. The following sections examine what students said once they were in that room.

When Peers Are in the Room: Suda in the Group Setting

The themes that surfaced across the three gimbap chat sessions echoed and expanded upon those established in the previous chapter. Students talked about the inadequacy of campus dining, the cultural weight of Korean food, the experience of homesickness, the difficulty of finding Korean food nearby, and the relationship between food and their sense of belonging at Uri University. In this sense, the gimbap chats confirmed and reinforced what the individual interviews had already established. What changed was the intensity and emotional directness with which these themes were expressed. The collective format and the presence of peers navigating similar experiences produced a quality of conversation that differed from the one-on-one interviews in consistent ways across all three sessions: critiques of campus dining were sharper and less qualified, the connection between food and identity

was spoken aloud as a shared truth rather than offered as a personal observation, and topics that had remained below the surface in individual interviews surfaced more readily in the group setting. This section traces those differences across three dimensions: the loosening of hedged critique, the collective articulation of food as identity, and the emergence of substantive new content, including reflections on food, mental health, and Korean community, that had not surfaced with comparable clarity in one-on-one interviews. The question of how students experienced the gathering itself is taken up separately in section four, which examines the outcomes beyond the conversation itself.

The Loosening of Hedged Critique. In the individual interviews, students frequently offered limited or qualified critiques of campus dining. They acknowledged institutional effort, expressed gratitude for options that existed even when those options fell short, and often qualified their frustrations with statements like "at least they try" or "I appreciate that they make the effort." This pattern of hedged critique appeared across many participants and reflected a genuine ambivalence: students were critical of the dining system, but they were also reluctant to seem ungrateful or unreasonable. In the gimbap chat sessions, this hedging did not disappear entirely, but it loosened considerably. The presence of peers who were expressing similar frustrations seemed to give students permission to be more direct, and collective laughter became a way of naming institutional failures that might have felt too blunt or too personal to articulate alone with a researcher.

In session one, for instance, one participant described the kimchi she had encountered at a campus dining hall as resembling mildly spicy coleslaw, cut differently from actual kimchi and sitting in what she called "a very watery slurry." The table laughed, and others quickly added their own examples: a Korean beef stir fry with beef cut too thick, a

tteokbokki at a campus cultural event that tasted sweet like an apple, a Korean chicken dish served with rice so dense it could be cut like dough. These descriptions had a sharper quality than what students had offered in individual interviews, where the same experiences tended to be narrated with more qualification. In the group, the shared absurdity of being served food labeled Korean that bore so little resemblance to Korean food became something students named together.

This loosening of critique extended to institutional structures beyond the dining halls. In session three, students moved fluidly from discussing dining hall food into conversations about transportation, access to Korean grocery stores, the absence of Korean-owned businesses on or near campus, and the suggestion that Kin Bake Shop, a Korean American-owned local café, should be brought onto campus. One participant made the case directly, sharing how she had observed students leaving campus specifically to get drinks from Kin and returning to study. She argued that bringing the business onto campus would benefit both the university and the community. While the Kin Bake Shop was also mentioned in individual interviews simply as a place in town that students would frequent to get Asian-style drinks and dessert, the conversation in the gimbap chat had the added-on quality of collective problem-solving, with students building on each other's suggestions in ways that felt generative and peer-driven rather than researcher-directed.

The way students shared information about Korean places in the surrounding area with each other during these exchanges was also noteworthy. When one student mentioned a Korean-owned restaurant or café she had discovered, she did so in such a way that resembled the act of sharing a treat, leaning in and conveying the information as something worth passing along. The others responded with immediate animation, either affirming that they

already loved the place or expressing genuine curiosity about trying it. This led to the student who had introduced a suggestion to quickly offer more details: how far it was, whether a bus could get you there, what to order. These exchanges illustrated something that the individual interviews could only gesture toward. Information about Korean food and Korean-owned spaces near campus circulates among Korean American students as a form of community knowledge, passed between people who understand why it matters. The gimbap chat created a natural setting for that kind of exchange to happen in real time.

Food and Identity as Shared Knowledge. In the individual interviews, students tended to articulate the connection between food and identity as a private and individual experience, treating it as particular to their own history rather than as something shared among peers. One student, for instance, described the specificity of her family's food practices by saying, "For us, we don't eat 미역국 (miyeokgook/seaweed soup) on birthdays – we eat spring rolls." In the gimbap chat sessions, that same connection became conversational and mutually reinforcing. A student in one session turned to the group and asked, "What do you guys do when you get sick, and there's nothing with 국물 (gookmool/soup)?" Students were quick to recognize and extend each other's observations, producing a kind of layered, collective articulation of what food meant to them as Korean Americans that the one-on-one interviews rarely achieved. The group setting made visible that these were not private experiences but shared ones.

One of the most substantive exchanges of this kind occurred in session two, when the conversation turned to why Korean families make such an effort to feed people. One participant said that she thought it was simply how Koreans show love, and that this was true

of mothers especially. Another student extended this observation into a historical frame, suggesting that the emphasis on feeding others was rooted in what earlier generations of Korean families had lacked, that the impulse to provide food abundantly was connected to histories of scarcity and the desire to give the next generation what had not always been available. I found myself drawn into this exchange as well, sharing my own recognition of what they were describing from my family and from living in Korea as a young adult. Though the session included only two student participants, the conversation built on itself across several minutes, with each person contributing a different layer of meaning to an observation that had begun as a simple statement about mothers and love. (This quality of depth is discussed further in the reflexive notes in section five, which addresses how group size shaped the character of each session.)

This collective meaning-making also surfaced in smaller, less structured moments. In session three, students compared their childhood memories of specific foods, including 미역국 (miyeok-guk), the seaweed soup traditionally eaten on birthdays, and the superstition that eating it before an exam would cause you to slip and fail. Students who had grown up with this belief laughed with those who had not heard it. The exchange moved quickly into a broader conversation about the cultural knowledge that Korean American students possess, often without being aware that others around them possess it too. These moments of recognition accumulated across the sessions into something that felt like a shared inventory of experience: a collective accounting of what it means to grow up Korean American that students were conducting together in real time.

Disclosures the Group Format Made Possible. While the gimbap chats largely confirmed the themes from the individual interviews, several threads emerged in the group

sessions that had not surfaced as clearly in one-on-one conversations. One of the most significant involved the relationship between food, mental health, and the body. In session three, while the group was talking about how students feel emotionally at Uri University and whether food had ever played a role in that, one participant shared to the group that she had experienced an eating disorder. She went on to describe the particular difficulty of navigating that experience within a Korean cultural context, where food carries so much weight, noting that Korean food was also the food she turned to for comfort, which made the tension harder to resolve. Another participant picked up the thread of this conversation directly, describing the stress of always being worried about what to eat alongside the pull of Korean food as a source of solace, and observing that the foods she craved most were also the ones that made her feel worst about herself. A third described a period the previous year when depression had made it hard to motivate herself to eat at all, and that when she did manage to get to the dining hall, the food there was so inadequate that the effort barely felt worth it. Another student also added their experience of surviving on Starbucks double shots for weeks during a difficult stretch, rarely eating anything else. None of this content had surfaced in the individual interviews. The group setting seemed to make it possible: each disclosure arrived not in response to a direct question from me, but in response to what the person before had just shared.

A second thread that emerged more clearly in the gimbap chats than in the individual interviews concerned the role of Korean community in their social and emotional lives on campus. While students had talked about Korean student organizations in their individual interviews, the group sessions produced more reflective and nuanced observations about what community meant to them and why. In session three, one participant offered a sustained

reflection on why finding a Korean community had been important to her, describing the particular comfort of friendships in which she could move between Korean and English, share cultural references without explanation, and feel recognized in ways that friendships with non-Korean students, however meaningful, could not always provide. Another participant in the same session described feeling that her Korean identity was something she had drifted away from during her time at Uri University. She also said that the gimhap chat had reminded her of a part of herself she had not realized she had set aside. These observations were richer and more reflective than what the individual interviews had produced on similar topics, and they suggest that the group format, by putting students in conversation with peers who shared their background, created conditions for a kind of retrospective self-examination that the one-on-one setting had not reliably produced.

Culturally Relevant Activity as Relational Condition

The previous section examined what the group format changed about how students spoke. This section examines what the food itself contributed. The argument is not that gimhap was the only food that could have produced these conditions, but that a culturally relevant, participatory food did something that a neutral or unfamiliar one would not have.

Gimhap is a common dish in Korea, made from seasoned rice, vegetables, and protein rolled in dried seaweed and sliced into bite-sized pieces. Every participant in the gimhap chats had eaten it before, most of them repeatedly and in meaningful contexts. It was not, however, easily available near campus. According to my field research, there was no Korean restaurants or markets within convenient distance of the university that sold it, and none of the dining halls or nearby restaurants served it. This meant that gimhap occupied an interesting position: deeply familiar to everyone in the room, but largely absent from their

daily lives at Uri University. Bringing it into the research space reintroduced something that participants recognized and had feelings about, and those feelings surfaced quickly. In session three, for instance, one participant described how her mother rarely made the full multi-ingredient version because it took so long, and that when she did, the occasion felt significant. Another recalled eating gimbap at Korean church as a child, offered as an incentive for attending Sunday school, and laughed at the specificity of the memory. A third shared that her most vivid memory of it was eating only the yellow pickled radish at an all-Korean preschool and ignoring everything else. These were personal histories that participants had not been asked to share. They surfaced because the food was there, present and familiar, and because other people at the table were sharing their own versions. One participant's recollection prompted another's, and associations that might have felt too small or too personal in a one-on-one research setting became natural contributions to a shared exchange.

The participatory nature of the activity also mattered. Participants came with varying levels of experience making gimbap, which created a natural basis for comparison and conversation without creating hierarchy. Some had helped their mothers growing up; others had never made it themselves. The activity was forgiving enough that everyone could do it, specific enough that everyone had an opinion about it, and sufficiently tied to shared cultural memory that the making itself became a prompt for recollection.

The participants also noted that the presence of Korean food communicated something beyond sustenance. The sessions included not only gimbap but 라면(ramyeon/instant noodle), 김치(kimchi/fermented vegetables), Korean snacks like “Oh Yes” and “Milki.” Participants were encouraged throughout to make more gimbap home, to

eat until they were full, and to take leftovers including snacks back to their rooms. In Korean cultural practice, offering food generously is itself a communicative act, a way of expressing welcome and care that operates alongside and sometimes instead of verbal expression (H. Jung, 2015; Kittler et al., 2017). Several participants recognized this logic explicitly. In session two, one participant observed that the abundance was how Koreans show love, and that she wished the university would show its students love in a similar way. In session one, one student who stayed to clean up noted that the presence of several dishes on the table reminded them of 정 (jeong), a Korean concept describing a mix of affinity, affection, and collective social responsibility that has no direct English translation (KnowingKorea, n.d.). The gift cards for Kin Bake Shop, a Korean American-owned local café distributed at the close of each session, extended this same logic into the final gesture of each gathering. One participant named the choice explicitly in her post-session survey response, writing that the gift card felt "so appropriate" and that it "matched the vibe of our meeting" because Kin was also Korean American, as is she. Taken together, the food and the activity created a shared starting point that participants brought their own histories to. What students did with that starting point once they began talking is taken up in the following section.

What the Method Made Possible: Community as Data

The previous three sections have each examined a distinct dimension of what happened within the gimbap chat sessions: how the rolling created methodological conditions, how the group format changed the register of students' speech, and how gimbap as a specific food did relational work. This section turns outward from the sessions themselves to examine what they produced beyond the conversation: what participants said about the experience in retrospect, what happened at the edges of each session when the

formal activity had wound down, and what the gimbap chat format made possible for students in ways that extended beyond the scope of any single research encounter.

The survey responses sent about a week after each session offer a window into how participants experienced the gimbap chats, and the consistency across responses is striking given that participants attended different sessions, ranged from first-year to senior students, and varied considerably in how connected they already felt to Korean community on campus. Across nine responses, participants described the sessions using words like "comforting," "therapeutic," "validating," "warm," and "refreshing." Several noted that the experience had reminded them of something they had not realized they were missing. One participant wrote that the session had reminded her of "a part of my identity that I think I had forgotten," and that it had confirmed for her that she was "always part of the Korean-American community whether I am away or at home." Another described feeling grateful for the opportunity to connect with other Korean American students, noting that coming to Uri University she had assumed there would not be many, and that meeting others had been "a meaningful and fun experience." A third wrote simply that the session had made her feel less alone.

These responses point to something the gimbap chat format produced that individual interviews, by their structure, cannot generate: a temporary community. Students who had never met each other before the session left having shared a meal, learned about each other's families and food memories, laughed together about campus dining, and, in several cases, exchanged contact information. The community produced by each session was small and time-limited, but it was real, and participants seemed to experience it as meaningful in proportion to how isolated they had felt before. One participant noted that she rarely spent time with other Korean students and that it had been "nice being surrounded by a culture I'm

more familiar with for a bit." The phrasing is modest, but the sentiment it carries is significant: for a few hours, the campus felt different.

What happened at the edges of the sessions reinforced the observation that the format produced something participants were reluctant to leave. In all three sessions, students lingered after the formal activity had ended, continuing to talk, rolling additional gimbap to take home, and in some cases, staying well past the time the session was scheduled to conclude. For instance, the gimbap chats were scheduled for ninety minutes, but in two of the three sessions, we ended up hanging out for over two hours. In session one, the conversation about Korean student organizations, Korean-owned spaces near campus, and what the university could do differently continued for more a while after the last pieces of gimbap had been cut and eaten. In session two, the two participants stayed to finish their food and kept talking. After about an hour of time listening and contributing to the conversation, I found myself offering to review one participant's resume before she graduated, a gesture that felt natural in the context of a conversation that had moved well beyond the bounds of a research session. These moments of lingering suggest that the relationships formed during each session had enough warmth and substance to sustain conversation well past its formal endpoint.

A few moments across the three sessions stood out as particularly significant in terms of what the gimbap chat format made possible, though in unexpected ways. The first came during session one, which was also personally the most difficult to facilitate. It was the largest group, students arrived at different times requiring multiple rounds of introductions, and for a stretch in the early part of the session the conversation had not yet found its footing, though it did gradually become a robust conversation. At some point after the conversations

had picked up, I had finally started to relax and enjoy the conversations myself one participant surprised me: while helping me bring more snacks, she briefly referred to me as 언니 (unnee/older sister) instead of by name. She said it once, in passing, and I do not think she noticed she had used the word. However, it was a notable moment for me because in Korean, unnee (along with the other similar terms 형/hyoung, 누나/noona, 오빠/oppa) is a term used for someone older who is close to you (A. Kim, 2018). In the Korean culture, it is custom to not use first names when referring to someone older than you. However, there are more formal terms the participants could have used, such as using the suffix -씨(-ssi), or (-님)/-nim, or as is common in more professional settings, by referring me by my job title, such as researcher (연구자님) or even a more senior student, 선배 (sunbae) (A. Kim, 2018). However, while she had referred to me by my first name during the individual interview, she had slipped to call me the most familiar, casual, and friendly of the Korean terms, of calling me unnee, older sister.

The second moment unfolded differently, at the edges of a session rather than within it. In the midst of all the food and laughter, this session had run long, about an hour after the scheduled end time. As it grew dark outside, I offered onparticipant a ride home with my husband, who had been present before and after the sessions to help with setup and cleanup. During that ride, she discovered that my husband is a psychiatrist. Excited about this discovery, she shared that she had always wanted to pursue a career in psychiatry but had never encountered a Korean American psychiatrist and had wondered, for a long time, whether that path was really available to someone like her. She later reached out to ask if she could speak with him more about the possibility. While this interaction happened after the session ended, it came out as a side-effect of the rich conversation at the gimhap chat: the

session ran long because participants were reluctant to leave, that lingering led to the offer of a ride, and the ride opened another conversation that resulted in the start of another small community connection beyond the research setting. The research encounter did not produce that outcome directly, but it created the relational warmth and extended time that made it possible.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the gimbap chat format produced something that might be described as community data. The connections students made, the recognition they experienced, the sense of belonging they described in their survey responses, and the conversations that continued past the formal endpoint of each session were all, in a meaningful sense, findings. They were evidence of what becomes possible when Korean American students are given time, food, and a shared space to be in each other's company.

Researcher Posture and Methodological Reflection

Any methodological contribution worth taking seriously requires honest reflection on what the method demands of the person using it, and the gimbap chat format is no exception. This section steps back from the empirical findings of the previous sections to reflect on what it was like to design and facilitate these sessions, what I had to hold differently as a researcher in a group setting compared to a one-on-one interview, and what I would do differently if I were to use this format again. These reflections are offered as practical and conceptual observations that might be useful to other researchers interested in adapting food-centered Suda methodology for their own work.

The most immediately noticeable difference between facilitating the gimbap chats and conducting individual interviews was the degree to which my attention was divided. In a

one-on-one interview, I could give my full focus to the person in front of me, listening carefully, following threads, and allowing silence to do its work. In the gimbap chat sessions, I was simultaneously managing the food preparation, monitoring the dynamics of a group conversation, tracking which participants had spoken and which had spoken less, and staying attuned to unexpected moments that required a light touch rather than a direct response. In session one in particular, my husband's arrival with the cups of ramyeon I had forgotten mid-session created a moment of warm disruption that the group responded to with laughter at the way he entered the room by sneaking in on tiptoes. It also required me to shift my attention briefly away from a conversation that had been building momentum. Learning to hold these competing demands without losing the thread of what participants were saying was something I got better at across the three sessions, but it was difficult and a real challenge that future researchers should anticipate.

The decision to share my own story at the opening of each session also required something from me that a more conventional research protocol would not have. Self-disclosure in qualitative research is not uniformly productive or unproblematic. It can open space for participants to share more freely, but it can also inadvertently shape what participants feel they are expected to say, or center the researcher's experience in a way that competes with participants' own narratives or shared version of their lives, perspectives, and experiences (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). I made a deliberate effort across all three sessions to share enough of my own story to signal openness and cultural solidarity, while being careful not to share so much that participants felt they were listening to me rather than being listened to. Specifically, I shared the story about how why I love gimbap and the appreciation I feel for my mom who often makes it for me as an opener,

but once students started sharing their own stories and asked each other their stories, I did not volunteer any more stories with my own unless directly asked. Whether I struck the right balance is something I cannot assess from inside my own experience of the sessions, and it is one of the places where member checking or peer debriefing with a larger research team would have been a valuable addition to the research process.

The question of group size is something I would attend to more carefully in future applications of this method. As described above, the smaller group of two participants in session two produced a different quality of conversation than the sessions with larger groups. While it had its own warmth and depth, the lateral dynamic I had designed the format to produce was harder to sustain with so few participants. Based on my experience across the three sessions, I would suggest that a group of four to five participants would be the ideal number of participants for this kind of food-centered Suda session. Fewer than four makes it difficult to generate the peer-to-peer exchange that gives the format its distinctive quality, while more than five risks making the food preparation logistics unwieldy and giving the session a character that is more workshop than community gathering. I also found that setting the tone of hospitality in the Korean way, by having a small amount of food already available when participants arrived, such as Korean snacks to eat while others were still signing consent forms, helped ease the opening of each session by giving people something to do immediately and setting a tone of welcome from the moment they arrived.

The preparation required for each session was also more substantial than I had initially anticipated. The gimbap ingredients had to be cooked separately and in advance, which took between three to five hours depending on how efficiently I worked, improving considerably across the three sessions. The space had to be set up with cutting boards, knives,

gloves, plates, and drinks before participants arrived, and consent forms, name tags, audio recording devices, and gift cards all had to be organized and ready. All of this had to be managed while also being emotionally and mentally prepared to facilitate a session that required presence and attentiveness. The preparation never became easy, and I do not think it should. The labor of preparation was part of what communicated care to participants, and shortcuts in that labor would likely have been perceptible in ways that affected the relational quality of each gathering.

The emotional experience of facilitating these sessions was different from anything else in this research process. The individual interviews were often moving and occasionally difficult, as participants shared experiences of loneliness, cultural disconnection, and institutional neglect that I recognized from my own past. The gimbap chats produced something additional: a quality of joy that I had not fully anticipated. Watching students who had never met each other before laugh together, compare their gimbap rolls, trade information about Korean restaurants near campus, and linger past the end of the session because they were not ready to leave was genuinely moving. It reminded me of why I chose this research focus, and it made the harder parts of the dissertation process feel worthwhile. I include this not because it changes the analysis, but because research designed around care has the potential to be caring toward the researcher as well, and that reciprocity is worth naming as part of an honest account of what this method asks of the person who uses it.

Across the three sessions, the gimbap chats produced data that the individual interviews could not have generated on their own: conversations in a different register, disclosures made possible by the presence of peers, and moments of connection that extended beyond the boundaries of the research encounter. They also produced something harder to

categorize but no less real, which was a temporary community among students who had not previously known each other and who, for two hours at a time, shared food, laughter, and belonging. Chapter 6 draws on the findings from across all data sources in this study to examine what the experiences of Korean American undergraduate students at Uri University suggest about the relationship between food, cultural belonging, and institutional responsibility in higher education.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Toward a Culturally Nourishing Campus

The preceding chapters mapped the contours of cultural food deprivation as an experience that existing higher education frameworks have not yet adequately named. The Korean American undergraduate students who participated in this study arrived at a residential campus with institutional markers of material food adequacy, such as dining hall access with a meal plan. What they encountered, documented across sixteen individual interviews and three gimbap chat sessions, was a campus food environment built around cultural assumptions about taste and food history that they did not share, designed for a student whose palate and culinary background the institution treated as universal. The rice did not taste right. The foods labeled Korean did not taste Korean. The dining hall offered calories but not comfort, and nutrition but not recognition. Students described this gap by naming what they experienced as emotional hunger, *허기짐* (heogijim), a condition of cultural and relational deprivation that the conventional vocabulary of food insecurity or physical hunger cannot fully capture.

In this chapter, I draw together the findings from Chapters 4 and 5 to discuss their implications for higher education scholarship, practice, and policy. I organize my discussion around four interlocking arguments. First, I consider how these findings contribute to the existing body of scholarship on campus food environments, student belonging, and the experiences of Korean American undergraduates. Second, I examine what the findings reveal about the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model and present the case for extending it to include campus food environments as a tenth indicator of cultural engagement. Third, I describe what food-centered, Suda-informed methods offer to

qualitative researchers in higher education more broadly. Fourth, I address what the findings suggest for higher education policy, institutional practice, and the design of campus food environments that serve racially diverse student populations more fully.

Empirical Contributions

This section considers what the data produced by this study contribute to and extend in relation to the existing literature. Three patterns are examined in turn. The first concerns the empirical gap this study was designed to address: whether and how the cultural content of campus food environments shapes belonging and well-being for Korean American undergraduates. The second concerns the role of the model minority myth not simply as a social stereotype but as a form of institutional infrastructure that operates at the level of individual student self-perception. The third concerns the forms of community cultural wealth students mobilize when institutions fail to provide culturally adequate food environments, and what Yosso's (2005) framework asks institutions to do in response.

Substantiating the Empirical Gap. The existing literature on campus food environments has organized itself primarily around material and physiological frameworks. Scholars have asked whether students have enough food (Maroto et al., 2015; Nazmi et al., 2019), whether that food is nutritious (Dhillon et al., 2019; Tseng et al., 2016), whether they can afford it (Dhillon et al., 2019; Willis, 2019), and whether institutional structures are producing or relieving material deprivation (Esaryk et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2017). This study posed a different question: what does the campus food environment communicate to students whose cultural food practices are structurally absent, and what does that communication mean for the students who experience it daily? The data from both Chapters

4 and 5 suggest that the literature had not yet directly examined these questions for any specific minoritized student population in a sustained way.

Students in this study experienced a campus food environment that I argue is an enactment of White normativity, the institutional default that Morris (2016) describes as presenting whiteness as a neutral or standard baseline while rendering other cultural practices as marked, supplementary, or foreign. This default accumulated across a thousand seemingly minor daily experiences: the rotation of dining hall menus organized around Western proteins and starches, the token appearance of dishes labeled Korean that bore no resemblance to its authentic counterparts, the absence of the correct type of rice nor rice prepared in ways that tasted familiar, and the inability to access banchan or doenjang jjigae or the particular comfort of a bowl of rice that tastes like what their mothers made. As Goodwin (2010) argues in relation to curriculum, the daily organization of institutional life around a presumed mainstream communicates whose cultural practices the institution treats as ordinary and whose it treats as supplementary or foreign. This study showed how that logic applies with equal force to the organization of the campus dining hall. What Harper (2012) identifies in higher education more broadly, an institution whose own design produces racially disparate experiences without any individual actor intending that outcome and without the structures in place to name or address it, is visible in the findings from this study in one of its most embodied forms.

The message the campus food environment sends is structural rather than deliberate, and as Gillborn (2005) and Morris (2016) both argue, it is precisely that structural quality, the transparency of whiteness as default, that makes it so difficult for individual students to name or resist. The data from this study shed particular light on this difficulty. Students in

this study could articulate, with clarity, that the dining hall did not serve their cultural needs; what was harder for them to do was name that gap as a structural problem rather than a personal inconvenience. The gimbap chat format was specifically useful in surfacing this dynamic. When students sat around a table eating gimbap that they could roll up with only the ingredients they recognized, the contrast with their daily campus dining experience became immediate, specific, and expressed in ways that the individual interview format had not produced. Critiques that had been hedged or softened in one-on-one conversations became collective naming, and private experiences that students had carried as personal peculiarities became, in the group setting, shared structural observations. The gimbap chat format thus illuminated not only what students had experienced but also the conditions under which they felt authorized to name it as something other than their own problem.

The findings from this study document that the enactment of White normativity in the campus food environment produces consequences that extend well beyond dietary dissatisfaction. Students described homesickness specifically anchored to food, not to a general longing for home but to the particular absence of foods that had organized their experience of care, belonging, and cultural identity. Several described weight loss, disrupted sleep, and declining energy as physical consequences of eating food that did not satisfy them emotionally even when it supplied adequate calories. This pattern echoes Wright et al.'s (2021) concept of cultural food insecurity, which describes the depression, anxiety, loneliness, and identity erosion experienced by second-generation American minority college students when they could not access, prepare, or share cultural foods. The data from this study extend that concept by documenting the specific mechanisms through which cultural food deprivation operates for Korean American students: the inauthenticity that students

found more insulting than invisibility, the internalized deservingness (Schneider & Ingram, 2005) that led them to accept inadequate provision as appropriate, and the navigational labor required to find culturally familiar food outside the institution. I return to internalized deservingness in greater depth in the following subsection, as this pattern emerged with particular consistency and carries specific policy implications.

The session-based format confirmed the empirical patterns that emerged in individual interviews while also demonstrating something the individual data alone could not. The experience of cultural food deprivation on campus was structural and widely shared, and Korean American students at Uri University recognized it as such when given a collective context in which to say so. This finding has implications that extend beyond this study's specific site. The difficulty these students had in naming their experience as structural, and the ease with which they did so once placed in a collective setting, reflects a broader dynamic that scholars of White normativity have identified across educational institutions: when an institution's default is treated as unmarked, the burden of perception falls on individuals who must first recognize the default as a choice before they can critique it (Gillborn, 2005; Morris, 2016). What this study adds to that account is evidence of how collective, culturally grounded settings can create the conditions under which that recognition becomes possible.

The Model Minority Myth as Institutional Infrastructure. A second major pattern that the data confirm and extend concerns the operation of the model minority myth as a form of institutional infrastructure rather than merely a social stereotype. The existing literature establishes that the model minority myth obscures variation within Asian American student populations, suppresses the perceived need for institutional attention, and operates in campus food systems just as it operates in public health data, by generating an assumption of self-

sufficiency that reduces institutional investment in targeted support (Museus et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2016; Teranishi et al., 2009). The data from this study add a dimension to that argument by documenting the internalization of the myth by students themselves, showing how the structural message that Korean American students' needs do not require accommodation has been absorbed at the level of individual self-perception.

Schneider and Ingram (2005) developed the concept of internalized deservingness to describe the process by which members of groups socially constructed as self-sufficient or undeserving come to accept that construction and apply it to their own expectations of institutions. In the domain of public policy, they argue that groups perceived as advantaged are less likely to advocate for themselves and more likely to accept inadequate provision as appropriate, because the structural message that their needs do not warrant public investment has been internalized as a personal belief. Prior applications of this concept in educational research have focused primarily on its behavioral dimensions: whether students from minoritized or model-minority-coded populations seek out available support services, self-advocate with faculty or advisors, or formally report unmet needs (Museus et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2016). These applications have been valuable, but they locate internalized deservingness at the point of behavioral response, asking whether students act on their needs once those needs have been identified.

What this study documents is internalized deservingness operating one step earlier, at the level of interpretation rather than behavior. Students in this study were not simply declining to report dissatisfaction to dining services; they were actively re-narrating their dissatisfaction as something other than dissatisfaction before any behavioral question arose. The move from critique to self-correction happened within single utterances, not across time

or institutional encounters. A student would name, with precision, that the dining hall did not serve food that tasted or felt Korean, and then, within the same breath, offer an explanation that relocated the problem from institutional design to demographic arithmetic: Korean students are a minority, the institution has to serve the masses, it makes sense that the food reflects that. The critique and its retraction appeared together, as a unit, suggesting that students had not simply decided not to complain but had come to understand the inadequacy of their food environment as a feature of the demographic landscape rather than a product of institutional choices. This is a meaningfully different phenomenon from underutilization of services. It describes internalized deservingness functioning as a perceptual filter, one that shapes how students narrate their own experience before they ever reach the threshold of deciding whether to act on it.

This pattern appeared consistently across both data sources. Students who articulated, with clarity and precision, that the campus food environment did not serve their cultural needs repeatedly withdrew that critique within the same breath, offering self-corrections that positioned the institution's minimal effort as understandable or even generous. These patterns revealed how deeply students had internalized a structural message delivered not through explicit speech but through the daily architecture of an institution that treats some cultural needs as requiring justification and others as requiring none (Goodwin, 2010; Poon et al., 2016). The result was a form of institutional silence that institutions themselves did not produce through suppression or discouragement but that students generated through their own active participation in narrating their needs as unworthy of institutional attention. That silence is consequential precisely because it is invisible: an institution looking for signs of

student dissatisfaction would not find them, not because students were satisfied but because they had already done the work of converting their dissatisfaction into accommodation.

The policy implications of this pattern are direct and consequential. Institutions that rely on student advocacy or formal complaint as the mechanism for identifying unmet cultural needs will systematically undercount those needs among student populations that have internalized the expectation that their concerns do not warrant institutional attention. This dynamic is not unique to the campus food environment. The long institutional resistance to establishing ethnic studies departments offers a parallel example: when the scholarly and educational legitimacy of minority communities' intellectual traditions is treated as a question requiring justification, students from those communities are less likely to demand their recognition (Cunanan et al., 2023; Hu-DeHart, 1993; Poon et al., 2016). The same structural logic operates in campus dining. Students were not satisfied with the campus food environment, and they were not reporting that dissatisfaction to anyone with the power to change it. Understanding why requires taking seriously the role of internalized deservingness not as a student failing but as a predictable response to structural conditions that communicate, repeatedly and daily, that a student's cultural needs are a private matter rather than an institutional responsibility. Addressing it requires institutions to stop waiting to be told what students need and to build the proactive assessment structures that can surface needs students have already learned not to voice.

Community Cultural Wealth and the Labor of Cultural Navigation. A third pattern the data reveal extends the literature on community cultural wealth by showing how that wealth is activated, circulated, and taxed when institutions fail to provide culturally adequate food environments. In Chapter 4, students described strategies for acquiring culturally

relevant foods that required substantial navigational and emotional labor: driving two hours to the nearest Korean supermarket to stock up on food, paying premium prices for Korean delivery through grocery apps, moving off campus specifically to secure cooking space, and sharing location intelligence with peers through informal networks about where Korean food could be found on and around campus. This labor was routine, largely invisible to the institution, and entirely unfunded by it. In some cases it came at a direct financial cost to students, such as when the Korean Student Club accumulated debt from unanticipated institutional charges and was required to organize a campus-wide fundraiser selling rice bowls to students to recover the funds. Students were doing the work that institutions committed to culturally engaging environments, as the CECE model defines them (Museus, 2014), are supposed to do. They were doing it out of necessity, on their own time and resources.

Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework names what these strategies represent: familial capital embedded in food knowledge and practice, navigational capital exercised in institutional environments not designed for these students, social capital organized through peer networks built around shared cultural needs, and resistant capital expressed in the refusal to stop wanting what the institution did not provide. The informal peer knowledge networks students relied on to locate culturally familiar food resources reflect a dynamic that Zhou and Kim (2006) identify in their study of supplementary education in Chinese and Korean immigrant communities: ethnic social structures function as engines of information circulation, connecting community members to resources and knowledge that formal institutions have not provided. Zhou and Kim describe how ethnic schools, churches, and community organizations in Korean immigrant communities extend

well beyond their stated educational purposes, functioning as sites where valuable practical knowledge is generated and redistributed among co-ethnic communities. Students in this study were building an analogous structure through their peer networks, using shared cultural knowledge about local Korean restaurants, delivery services, and community spaces to compensate for the campus food environment's cultural gaps. The labor of that knowledge-sharing was real and ongoing, and it fell entirely outside the institution's awareness.

What Yosso's framework asks of institutions, and what this study's data make urgent, is that the existence of community cultural wealth not be used to justify institutional inaction. The fact that Korean American students found ways to meet their own cultural food needs is not evidence that the institution's provision was adequate; it is evidence that students bore costs the institution declined to recognize. This dynamic extends well beyond campus food environments. As examples of this broader pattern, Muslim students at predominantly White institutions have documented similar invisible labor in creating identity-safe spaces for religious practice when institutions fail to provide them (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006), and recent research on halal food access in K-12 and university settings reveals analogous gaps where Muslim students must navigate inadequate institutional provision of culturally appropriate food (Keleher et al., 2024). In campus mental health services, Asian American students consistently underutilize counseling resources due to the absence of culturally competent providers, leading to peer-based support networks and off-campus help-seeking that mirrors the food-resource sharing documented in this study (Goel et al., 2023; L. C. Li & Kim, 2004; Wang & Kim, 2010). In each case, the existence of community-based workarounds masks institutional responsibility rather than reflecting institutional responsiveness. When ethnic and religious minority communities are left to fill gaps that campus services have not

bothered to close, the costs of that gap are externalized onto students whose needs have already been rendered peripheral by institutional design.

The gimbap chat sessions confirmed the Suda dimensions of this capital. When Korean American students were given a collective food space, they immediately and fluently used it for the kinds of extended, lateral, emotionally open exchange that Meacham et al. (2022) describe as Suda's characteristic form. Students built community within the sessions themselves, exchanged resource information, affirmed each other's experiences, and several left having made connections they described as meaningful. What Yosso's (2005) framework asks of institutions is that they create conditions in which students do not have to perform extraordinary navigational labor to meet needs the institution has decided, by default, are not its concern. The data show how far Uri University's food environment currently falls from that standard, and they suggest that closing the gap would not require wholesale institutional reinvention so much as a sustained redirection of attention toward the students already on campus and the costs they are absorbing.

The Campus Food Environment as a Tenth Culturally Engaging Domain

This section develops the central theoretical contribution of this dissertation, that the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model should be extended to include a tenth indicator encompassing the campus food environment. I define a culturally nourishing food environment as a campus food environment that recognizes, reflects, and actively supports the cultural food practices of the students it serves. The section proceeds in three parts. The first examines what the CECE model currently captures and where food fits within its existing logic. The second makes the affirmative case for a new indicator drawing on empirical, structural, and relational arguments from the data. The third traces the connections

between the proposed tenth indicator and four of the nine existing CECE indicators to show that the addition strengthens rather than departs from the framework's foundational premises.

What the CECE Model Captures and Where Food Belongs Within It. The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017) provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the degree to which campus environments engage the cultural backgrounds of racially diverse student populations. Its nine indicators, organized across the dimensions of cultural relevance and cultural responsiveness and derived from the voices and experiences of students of color, name what matters for belonging: cultural familiarity, culturally relevant knowledge, cultural community service, meaningful cross-cultural engagement, collectivist cultural orientations, culturally validating environments, humanized educational environments, proactive philosophies, and the availability of holistic support (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). The framework has been widely taken up in higher education research and practice as a tool for institutional assessment and equity-oriented campus improvement (Museus et al., 2018; Peczalska, 2025), and its indicators have demonstrated meaningful predictive power for student belonging and persistence outcomes among racially diverse student populations (Museus et al., 2017).

Campus dining does not yet appear among the CECE indicators, and the framework is oriented primarily toward academic and social environments including courses, advising, faculty and peer relationships, and institutional practices in those domains (Museus, 2014). This is consistent with the empirical literature that existed at the time of the model's development, when scholarship on the cultural dimensions of campus food environments was thin (Weaver-Hightower, 2011). The CECE model's indicators were derived from existing research, and that research had not yet attended to food as an educational and cultural site in

any sustained way. What has changed is the literature, including through this study's findings, which contributes to a growing body of evidence that makes the inclusion of food environments in culturally engaging campus environment frameworks both necessary and consistent with the logic of the CECE model.

A core claim of the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model is that campus environments in which students encounter regular institutional signals that their cultural backgrounds are recognized, valued, and reflected produce higher levels of belonging, more positive academic dispositions, and greater likelihood of persistence and degree completion (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). The strongest predictors of belonging for students of color in the model are cultural familiarity, cultural validation, collectivist cultural orientations, proactive philosophies, and holistic support (Museus et al., 2017). Any institutional domain that constitutes a daily, unavoidable, repeated encounter with questions of cultural recognition belongs within the scope of what this framework asks institutions to examine. The dining hall, for a residential student, is exactly such a domain. Students in this study encountered it three times daily, often more, and every encounter was an encounter with the question of whether the institution knew who they were.

The Case for a Tenth Indicator: Culturally Nourishing Food Environments. The findings from this study substantiate the rationale for including the following tenth indicator in the CECE model: the degree to which the campus food environment reflects, recognizes, and honors the cultural food practices of its student population or culturally nourishing food environment. The case for this additional indicator rests on three arguments, each of which emerges from a different dimension of the evidence produced in this study. I define a

culturally nourishing food environment as a campus food environment that recognizes, reflects, and actively supports the cultural food practices of the students it serves.

The first argument rests on direct empirical evidence that food environments operate through established belonging mechanisms. Students in this study who lacked access to culturally familiar food described experiences of institutional invisibility, homesickness, and cultural isolation, while the gimbap chat sessions demonstrated how culturally grounded food spaces immediately produced belonging and community formation. This relationship operates through the same mechanisms the CECE model identifies as central: students who encounter a food environment that reflects their cultural backgrounds experience a form of cultural familiarity that the existing nine indicators describe as conducive to belonging (Museus et al., 2017), while students who encounter a food environment built on different cultural assumptions experience the form of cultural invisibility that the belonging literature identifies as a barrier to persistence (Strayhorn, 2012). The food domain activates the CECE model's core mechanisms, and the nine existing indicators offer no principled basis for excluding it from the framework's analytical scope.

These answers belong in the higher education conversation about what belonging means and what institutions owe the students they enroll (Strayhorn, 2012). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model provides the framework within which they can be heard (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017), and the proposed tenth indicator is an attempt to ensure that food environments are included in the audit that the model invites institutions to perform. A campus that scores well on cultural familiarity, cultural validation, and collectivist cultural orientations in its advising offices and classrooms while serving a dining hall whose design communicates cultural indifference to a significant portion of its student

body three times a day has not achieved the standard the CECE model sets. The model's logic requires that the standard apply to the full campus environment, including the spaces where students eat.

The second argument is structural. Campus food systems at residential universities are mandatory institutional encounters, not optional ones. Students are required, by most residential housing arrangements, to purchase meal plans and to eat in spaces the institution controls. In the case of Uri University, for instance, a meal plan is a mandatory component of the residence hall package (Uri University Website, 2024). The dining hall is not a student-selected activity like a club or a course; it is an institutional environment that students inhabit daily for the entirety of their residential tenure. This structural feature means the cultural content of the campus food environment carries a different quality of impact than a culturally engaged course or culturally relevant programming option, because it cannot be opted into by students who benefit from it and opted out of by students who do not. It arguably shapes the daily experience of everyone on the meal plan, regardless of whether the institution has attended to what its cultural design communicates.

The third argument concerns what the gimhap chats produced. The food-centered environment in this study provided more than cultural familiarity in the object sense of a recognizable dish or ingredient. It created the conditions for Suda, for the kind of open, lateral, emotionally honest conversation through which cultural community is built and belonging is produced (Meacham et al., 2022). As demonstrated by the depth of conversations produced by students during gimhap chats and their reflections after the Suda, the cooking and eating sessions were themselves interventions in belonging, and their effects extended past the formal endpoint of each gathering into the peer connections students

formed, the resource information they exchanged, and what students described as an experience of being seen. This relational dimension is consistent with the collectivist cultural orientation indicator in the CECE model (Museus, 2014), which recognizes that environments built on values of togetherness and mutual support are particularly conducive to the success of students whose cultural backgrounds emphasize community over individual achievement. Food environments that reflect students' cultural practices and create space for communal eating are, by the logic built into the indicator, instances of collectivist cultural orientation expressed through institutional design.

Operationalized as a CECE indicator, this definition encompasses several dimensions that higher education researchers and institutional assessment tools could apply. These include the degree to which campus dining menus reflect the cultural food practices of the student population served; the quality and authenticity of representation when cultural foods are offered; the extent to which dining hall design creates space for communal, unhurried, relational eating rather than efficient individual consumption; the availability of cooking spaces where students can prepare their own culturally familiar foods; institutional proactivity in seeking disaggregated student feedback about the cultural adequacy of food offerings and demonstrating responsiveness to that feedback; and the degree to which dining services staff are trained and supported to understand the cultural significance of the foods they prepare and serve. These dimensions translate directly into the CECE model's existing logic and extend it without requiring a departure from the framework's foundational premises.

Connecting the Tenth Indicator to Existing CECE Indicators. The proposed addition connects to and amplifies several of the existing nine indicators in ways that

strengthen the model's overall coherence. A significant question this connection raises, however, is whether a tenth indicator is necessary if the food environment can be understood as an extension of what existing indicators already name. I address that question directly before tracing each connection.

The answer lies in what is structurally distinct about the food domain. The existing nine indicators address primarily academic and social environments, and the CECE model's assessment tools and survey instruments are oriented accordingly. A campus could score well on cultural familiarity, cultural validation, and collectivist cultural orientations as currently operationalized while its dining hall simultaneously communicates cultural indifference to a significant portion of its student body three times a day. The food environment is not captured by, and will not surface through, existing CECE indicator assessments without a dedicated indicator designed to name it. Adding a tenth indicator is not a theoretical redundancy; it is a practical necessity for ensuring that the campus food environment receives the analytical attention the model's own logic requires.

Cultural familiarity, the first CECE indicator, refers to the extent to which students have opportunities to connect with institutional agents who share their backgrounds and experiences (Museus, 2014). The campus food environment enacts this logic at the structural rather than interpersonal level: through its daily offerings, it communicates whose cultural backgrounds the institution treats as familiar and whose it treats as exceptional. A dining hall whose menus reflect the cultural food practices of Korean American students makes an institutional declaration that the CECE model already recognizes as consequential for belonging (Chen, 2009), extending the logic of cultural familiarity from interpersonal connections to the designed material environment students inhabit daily.

Culturally validating environments, the sixth CECE indicator, refers to settings in which institutional actors convey that they value the cultural backgrounds and identities of their students (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). The dining hall validates or fails to validate cultural identity through its menus in the same way faculty validate or fail to validate it through their pedagogical choices. When the dining hall centers certain cuisines as the unmarked default while listing others as international options, or misrepresents cultural dishes in ways that students find more insulting than invisible, it communicates institutional indifference with the full authority of a mandatory daily encounter. Students in this study described the token appearance of inauthentic Korean dishes as a form of performed inclusion that, because it was so visibly insufficient, communicated institutional indifference more effectively than no representation at all. This distinction is important for the case for a tenth indicator: it is not enough for an institution to gesture toward cultural representation in its dining hall; the quality and authenticity of that representation matter, and the existing CECE indicators do not yet provide the framework for assessing that distinction in the food domain.

Collectivist cultural orientations, the fifth CECE indicator, refers to campus environments characterized by values of teamwork and mutual support rather than individual achievement and competition (Museus, 2014). The communal dimensions of Korean food culture, including the practices of eating together, the sharing of banchan at a table, and the relational labor embedded in the preparation of gimbap, reflect exactly the collectivist values this indicator names. A dining environment designed to support communal eating, or that offers spaces where students could engage in their own cultural food preparation, enacts collectivist cultural orientation at the level of institutional design. The gimbap chats

demonstrated this directly: in three hours of rolling and eating together, students built the kind of lateral, peer-to-peer community that the individual interview setting could not produce (Gauntlett, 2011; Torre et al., 2008). However, the collectivist cultural orientations indicator, as currently operationalized, focuses primarily on pedagogical and social programming approaches to building community rather than on the material environment students inhabit daily. An institution could score well on collectivist cultural orientations through its classroom practices and student organizations while its dining hall simultaneously undermines those same values by offering no space for communal eating or culturally familiar food preparation. The food environment requires dedicated attention because it operates at a different institutional level, the mandatory, daily, material encounter that shapes belonging regardless of whether students opt into the academic and social programs where collectivist cultural orientations are typically enacted.

The proposed tenth indicator also connects meaningfully to proactive philosophies, the eighth CECE indicator, which refers to institutional actors who go beyond making information and support available to actively ensuring students can access it (Museus, 2014). Research on minoritized student populations has consistently documented a reluctance to self-advocate in institutional settings, particularly when students have internalized the expectation that their needs fall outside what institutions are obligated to address (Museus et al., 2017; Poon et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). As previously discussed, this pattern extends across multiple domains: Muslim students often do not formally request halal food options or prayer spaces (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006), Asian American students underutilize campus mental health services even when experiencing significant distress (Goel et al., 2023; Li & Kim, 2004), and first-generation college students from minoritized backgrounds frequently

avoid academic support services they are eligible to receive (Strayhorn, 2012). Proactive food-environment design would mean that institutions do not wait for Korean American students to formally request culturally familiar food, demand banchan, or organize a petition drive before acknowledging that the current design may be failing them. The data show why a reactive, advocacy-dependent approach will not reach the students who most need institutional attention: students who have internalized the expectation that their cultural needs do not warrant institutional response will not petition. They will adapt, absorb the cost, and find other ways to meet their own needs. This dynamic reveals why the proposed tenth indicator is essential rather than optional: without dedicated attention to food environments, institutions will systematically miss a daily, mandatory domain where belonging is either supported or undermined, precisely because the students most affected by inadequate provision are the least likely to demand change. A proactively designed, culturally nourishing food environment becomes not just what the tenth indicator would require institutions to build, but a necessary mechanism for identifying and addressing cultural needs that remain invisible under advocacy-dependent assessment approaches

Methodological Contributions: Ethics of Food-Centered Research

This section describes the contributions of the gimhap chat approach as a methodological intervention that offers new ways to ground qualitative research in minoritized people's cultural practices and departs from dominant research traditions. Two dimensions are considered. The first concerns what the format produced in terms of relational knowledge and belonging and what those results imply for the proposed tenth CECE indicator. The second concerns the timing of cultural food deprivation, arguing that the window of greatest institutional consequence is the early transition period and that the food

environment is a particularly high-leverage site for belonging interventions during that window.

What the gimbap chat Format Produced. The gimbap chat sessions were designed as a data collection method, but the analysis revealed that they also functioned, in their own right, as a form of institutional intervention. Students who had never met each other before spent three hours in a room that smelled like Korean food from the moment they arrived. They rolled gimbap together, ate together, talked together, and left having made connections that several described as meaningful. The method produced relational knowledge, in the form of candid, collective, emotionally open accounts that went deeper and more personal than the kind the individual interviews with the same students previously generated. It did so by creating specific conditions: the researcher as participant rather than interrogator, a culturally familiar shared task that required no particular skill and allowed for individual customization, and the unhurried, sensory atmosphere that food preparation produces. These are the exact conditions the CECE model and the Suda framework associate with belonging, cultural community, and the horizontal production of knowledge (Meacham et al., 2022; Museus, 2014). The format was itself an argument, in practice, for the proposed tenth indicator: a brief, low-resource, food-centered gathering produced belonging that months of institutionally-structured campus life had not.

Qualitative researchers in higher education have called for data collection methods grounded in the cultural practices and epistemological traditions of the communities being studied rather than imported wholesale from dominant research traditions (Meacham et al., 2022; Patel, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2013). The gimbap chat format responds to this call in a specific and replicable form. Its structure is straightforward: collectively preparing and eating

culturally familiar food with the researcher positioned as participant rather than interrogator, with considerable unstructured time built into the activity for conversation to develop organically.

The choice of preparing gimbap was deliberate. As a food that is deeply embedded in the everyday domestic life of Korean and Korean American families, gimbap carried shared and individual associations that a neutral or unfamiliar food could not have activated in the same way. Participants already had a personal relationship to it, rooted in the specific textures, smells, and relational memories of having made or eaten it with family. Equally important, gimbap requires no specialized culinary equipment or professional skill; anyone can roll it with simple instructions, and it can be adjusted to individual preference and eaten immediately. Such conditions gave each participant a degree of autonomy and creative investment within the shared activity. The act of choosing ingredients they preferred, rolling at their own standard of tightness, and eating what they had made gave participants something that was theirs within the collective experience, a quality that a pre-plated meal or a culturally neutral shared task would not have produced. As Gauntlett (2011) and Torre et al. (2008) document in research on shared activity methods, when participants are engaged in a task together, the social stakes of speech are lowered, silence becomes comfortable rather than threatening, and conversation tends to emerge laterally among participants rather than vertically through the researcher. The gimbap chats confirmed this pattern and demonstrated that the effect is amplified when the shared activity carries cultural charge because the activity itself becomes an entry point into the memories, meanings, and social histories that Suda-based inquiry is designed to surface.

The gimbap chats also raised questions about research ethics and participant experience. Research relationships with marginalized communities must attend to what participants are left with after the research is done, not only to what researchers take from the encounter (Tuck & Yang, 2013). Students who participated in the gimbap chats left with food, with new connections, and having had an experience in which their cultural practices were esteemed rather than seen as a problem to be documented. Several participants expressed genuine surprise and gratitude at being in a research space that made them feel seen rather than studied. That response reveals something about what the campus environment routinely offers or withholds for these students. Research designs that treat participant experience as a legitimate methodological concern, rather than a secondary consideration, are better positioned to generate the kind of knowledge that food-centered, community-building inquiry produces (Tuck & Yang, 2013; Meacham et al., 2022).

The Window of Earliest Need. The experience of cultural food deprivation was most acute and most consequential in the early weeks and months of a student's residential tenure. This pattern was found in both individual interviews and in group gimbap sessions. First-year students described the transition to campus dining in terms of loss: the rice did not taste like home, the foods that had organized their experience of care and comfort were not available, and the dining hall offered no foothold for the cultural identity that had until then been sustained partly through daily food practice. By the time some students had found the nearest Korean grocery store, Korean church communities, or app-based delivery services, the early isolation had already incurred costs from the students financially, physically, and emotionally. Research has shown that the need for belonging intensifies precisely when students are uncertain, homesick, academically overwhelmed, or socially isolated, conditions

that are most common during first-year students' fall transition period (Strayhorn, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2011; Wright et al., 2021). The data from this study confirm this and also show that the campus food environment is one of the primary daily sites through which that isolation can be either reinforced or interrupted. For Korean American students at Uri University, the data suggest that lack of access to culturally sustaining food contributed to feelings of disconnection during this vulnerable transition period.

This temporal pattern has direct implications for institutional practice. The findings from this study highlight the need for interventions designed to support culturally diverse students' belonging during the critical early transition period to explicitly include the food environment. Orientation programming that acknowledges the cultural dimensions of campus dining, student maps of nearby culturally familiar food resources, dining hall offerings expanded to include genuinely prepared cultural foods during the earliest weeks of the academic year, and proactive outreach from dining services to incoming students about what the institution offers and where the gaps are all represent relatively modest institutional efforts. The evidence produced by this study suggests these efforts could meaningfully reduce the early-semester belonging deficit that Korean American and other culturally minoritized students currently absorb, often without telling anyone, precisely because the deficit is accumulating during the weeks when belonging is most fragile. This is also the time when the institution has the most concentrated opportunity to demonstrate that it knows who its students are.

Implications for Higher Education Policy and Practice

The implications of this study speak to three distinct audiences: higher education administrators and dining services leaders responsible for campus food environments and

dining policy, student affairs professionals who work at the intersection of equity and student success, and researchers who will build on this work. For each audience, the argument moves from what the data show to what that evidence requires in terms of institutional attention, professional practice, or scholarly direction. The central claim is the same: campus food environments are not peripheral to the project of culturally engaging campus environments but integral to it, and they deserve the sustained, disaggregated, equity-oriented attention that other dimensions of campus culture have already begun to receive.

For Institutions: Rethinking the Dining Hall as a Cultural Environment. The most direct implication of this study for higher education practice is that campus dining services must be understood as a site of institutional culture, not only of nutritional provision. The design of a dining hall communicates whose cultural practices the institution treats as default and whose it treats as exceptional (Weaver-Hightower, 2022). This communication is expressed through every element of the dining environment: the menus that rotate weekly, the cuisines labeled as international versus those presented as simply food, the way cultural dishes are sourced and prepared, the physical design of eating spaces, and the extent to which dining services actively seek input from the students they serve. When that communication reaches students from culturally minoritized backgrounds three times a day, every day of their residential tenure, through menus organized around foods they did not grow up eating and token offerings that misrepresent the foods that carry cultural meaning for them, it functions as an institutional statement about recognition and visibility, repeated with the full authority of a mandatory, contractual food arrangement. This dynamic is not specific to Korean American students; any student whose food traditions are absent from or caricatured in the dining hall receives the same structural message, regardless of their national origin,

ethnicity, or immigration history. Even if the statement is not intentional, the data show clearly that students receive and internalize it.

Institutions committed to belonging for all students must audit their campus food environments with the same seriousness they apply to other dimensions of campus culture, such as faculty composition, curriculum content, and campus climate. This means gathering disaggregated data about student satisfaction with campus food by racial and ethnic identity, designed specifically to surface what the cultural adequacy of dining options looks like for student populations whose needs are currently invisible in aggregate measures. Aggregate data mask true disparities among Asian American subpopulations (Becerra et al., 2018; Teranishi et al., 2009; Vu et al., 2023), and the same principle applies to campus food environment assessments that do not collect or analyze disaggregated feedback (Becerra et al., 2018; Vu et al., 2023). It means investing in sourcing and procurement practices that prioritize authentic ingredients and preparation methods, developed in ongoing consultation with students and community members from the relevant cultural communities, rather than leaving authenticity decisions to dining vendors without cultural accountability mechanisms (Museus & Truong, 2009; Schweis, 2021). And it means treating the availability of culturally familiar and authentically prepared food as a factor in student belonging and physical and mental well-being, which, in turn, is associated with broader student success outcomes, rather than as a consumer amenity. This reframing requires that dining decisions be made in conversation with the student success and equity goals that drive other institutional investments.

When culturally minoritized students encounter a single dish that tastes recognizably like home, the response documented in this study is not satisfaction but surprise, and

sometimes something close to relief. The threshold of recognition is low, and meeting it requires less than most institutions assume. What the data show is that what has been missing is not the resources to achieve authentic cultural provision but the institutional attention to recognize it as a goal worth pursuing, and the commitment to involve the communities in question in defining what that provision should look like.

For Student Affairs and Higher Education Professionals. I argue that student affairs professionals and higher education administrators are better positioned to name what is at stake in the cultural dimensions of campus food environments, as their work is grounded in student success research, equity commitments, and belonging frameworks that emphasize cultural competence (Flowers, 2003). Research on student affairs professional preparation consistently emphasizes cultural competence and inclusive practice as core competencies, with 74% of student affairs graduate programs requiring diversity courses at the master's degree level (Flowers, 2003), and the field's professional standards explicitly call for practitioners to demonstrate "culturally appropriate" skills and "cultural and global perspectives" across all areas of practice (ACPA/NASPA, 2008). The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments model, with the addition of this study's suggestion of the culturally nourishing food environment indicator, provides a framework for translating these commitments into concrete assessment and action in terms that both practitioners and researchers recognize as analytically credible and institutionally actionable (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2017). Examples of how student affairs professionals have operationalized the CECE framework include McShay's (2017) application of the model to re-envision campus multicultural centers' programming and services, Salazar et al.'s (2025) use of CECE to examine institutional agents' roles in supporting undocumented students, and Agostinelli and

Albert's (2025) evaluation of international student support systems through the CECE lens. These applications demonstrate that the CECE framework has proven adaptable across diverse student populations and institutional contexts, suggesting that its extension to include campus food environments represents a logical expansion of existing assessment and intervention practices rather than a departure from established professional approaches.

Campus food environments are typically administered by dining services departments whose institutional identity tends to focus on food safety, nutritional standards, and financial sustainability, though research on their specific organizational priorities is limited as such priorities are generally not public information. Most studies of campus food services focus on nutrition and affordability rather than cultural adequacy or belonging outcomes (EdTrust, 2022) This organizational location means that the cultural dimensions of campus food environments are often invisible at the policy level, addressed through consumer satisfaction metrics that flatten the difference between preference and cultural need. The predominantly White demographics of higher education leadership may contribute to this gap, as research shows that despite modest improvements, White administrators continue to be overrepresented in key decision-making positions in higher education, accounting for 82% of higher education administrators but only 69% of U.S. graduate degree holders (Fuesting, 2023), with particularly concentrated representation in senior leadership roles (Gasman et al., 2015), and normalized whiteness in leadership theorizing and practice continues to shape institutional decision-making processes (Ladkin & Patrick, 2022; Sawyer & Waite, 2021). Decision-makers who lack personal experience with cultural food marginalization are less likely to recognize its institutional significance without intentional education and assessment. A student who rates the dining hall as three out of five stars while experiencing

허기짐 (heogijim) communicates something different from a student who rates it three out of five because the pasta was overcooked. However, general satisfaction data cannot distinguish between these issues, and without frameworks for understanding cultural belonging or training in equity-centered assessment, dining services departments may not know how to ameliorate or respond to concerns rooted in cultural inadequacy rather than operational failure.

Bringing campus food into conversations about belonging initiatives, equity-centered student success work, and campus climate assessments is not an expansion of student affairs' scope so much as an extension of existing commitments to the full institutional environment students inhabit. The conversation about campus food as an equity issue belongs in student affairs professional development, where it could be integrated into workshops on inclusive practice, sessions on recognizing and addressing microaggressions in campus environments, and training on conducting equity-minded assessment across all student-facing services. It belongs in campus climate assessment frameworks, where questions about cultural adequacy of food provision could be included alongside existing measures of inclusion and belonging. And it belongs in the institutional belonging work that these professionals are already leading, as they are positioned to make the case that culturally nourishing food environments are belonging interventions rather than consumer amenities.

Future Directions for Research

The data in this study come from a specific population: Korean American undergraduates at a single residential research university in California. Future research should extend these questions to other Asian American student populations whose campus food experiences have been similarly subsumed under aggregate data for the student group

"Asian" that cannot illuminate their specific needs (Becerra et al., 2018; Teranishi & Nguyen, 2012). In other words, disaggregated Asian American groups such Vietnamese American, Filipino American, Indian American students, among many others, bring food traditions and cultural relationships with institutional food environments that the existing literature has not examined with sustained attention. Disaggregated inquiry is necessary to understand the variation in how cultural food deprivation operates across groups whose immigration histories, generational statuses, and cultural food practices differ substantially.

The focus on Korean American students in this study reflects a methodological choice to examine one population in depth rather than making a claim that their needs are more pressing than those of other student groups. Culturally sustaining food environments should not be a niche accommodation for a specific constituency; they are an institutional condition that has the potential to support students from all cultural backgrounds, including those whose food traditions have long been treated as the unmarked default. Future research should expand this inquiry outward, examining how campus food environments shape belonging for students across racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds, and building an account of what it means for an institution to design a food environment that genuinely serves the full range of enrolled students.

Future research should also test the proposed tenth CECE indicator quantitatively, developing survey instruments that operationalize the dimensions of culturally nourishing food environments and examining their relationship to sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and persistence outcomes within the CECE model's existing framework. Museus et al.'s (2017) study of 15,109 students across multiple institution types found that the nine CECE indicators collectively explain 68% of the variance in belonging among

racially diverse student populations, suggesting that a model extended to include food environment indicators could have meaningful predictive power and potentially improve the model's overall explanatory capacity. The data assembled in Chapters 4 and 5 suggest strong face validity for the constructs such instruments would need to capture; scale development and large-sample testing at multiple institution types would provide the quantitative foundation that the qualitative evidence in this study cannot supply on its own.

Future research should also examine the experiences of international students alongside domestic students of color in the same campus food environments. Research on international student experiences has documented the importance of food in acculturation and belonging, with food serving as both a source of comfort and a site of cultural negotiation for students studying abroad (He et al., 2025). Studies specifically examining international students in the US context have found that access to culturally familiar food is linked to psychological well-being and successful academic integration (Dong, 2025), and research has documented how dissatisfaction with campus food contributes to isolation and adjustment difficulties among international student populations (A. Messa & A. Louis, 2025). Parallel patterns have been documented among second-generation American minority college students (Buell et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021). Comparative designs would allow researchers to examine whether the mechanisms identified in this study, including internalized deservingness, navigational labor, and peer-based knowledge sharing, operate similarly across groups whose relationship to the institution differs in legally and structurally important ways, and whether the proposed culturally nourishing food environment indicator predicts belonging similarly across groups with different relationships to campus food systems.

This study was designed to center student perspectives, and the data reflect that choice. An important gap remains, however, in the institutional perspective. I made multiple attempts to recruit higher education administrators and dining services staff at Uri University as participants, with the goal of understanding how campus food menu decisions are made and what factors are taken into consideration in that process. Those efforts did not yield participation. Future research would benefit substantially from access to the institutional decision-making side of campus food environments, and a study design that pairs student experience data with administrator and dining staff interviews would produce a more complete account of how cultural gaps in campus food environments are created, sustained, and potentially addressed.

Limitations

The claims made in this study are bounded by the specificity of its context. Uri University is a predominantly White institution in a state with a comparatively large Korean American population, and the particular combination of student demographic composition, institutional food culture, and local food landscape shapes the experiences documented here in ways that may not translate directly to institutions with different student bodies, urban versus rural settings, or varying levels of culturally familiar food resources in the surrounding community. The conclusions produced by this research are best understood as empirically grounded hypotheses about mechanisms and relationships that larger-scale, multi-site, and comparative research would need to test across a range of institutional and geographic contexts.

My own positionality as a Korean American woman with a personal history deeply connected to the themes under examination is worth naming directly as a feature of the

research design. The reflexive methodology employed here, including the use of Suda as both a theoretical lens and a methodological orientation (Meacham et al., 2022), treats this positionality as a resource rather than a contaminant. The gimhap chat sessions were designed by and facilitated by someone who shared cultural background with participants and who brought personal emotional investment in the research topic, and these conditions enabled the depth and candor documented in Chapter 5. They also mean that the format, as designed, may not translate directly to researchers without that shared cultural positioning. Adaptations for use by researchers of different cultural backgrounds would require thoughtful redesign rather than direct replication, and the methodological contribution this study claims for the gimhap chat format is more precisely a contribution of principle, that food-centered, culturally grounded methods can produce forms of relational knowledge other formats cannot, than a contribution of a universally portable technique.

Two additional methodological observations bear on the claims this study makes about the gimhap chat format specifically. First, while participants were meeting one another for the first time at each session, they were meeting me for the second time, having previously participated in individual interviews. The relational openness observed in the group sessions may have been shaped in part by that prior contact. I observed that conversation across all three sessions became notably more candid and lateral once the gimhap rolling began rather than at the outset, which suggests the activity itself played a meaningful role in generating the relational conditions the format produced. Whether that pattern holds when the researcher is also a stranger to participants is a question this study cannot answer, and future replications designed to test that condition would strengthen the methodological claims made here. Second, while the existing literature on shared activity

methods suggests that culturally relevant food activities lower the social stakes of disclosure and facilitate lateral conversation (Gauntlett, 2011; Torre et al., 2008), and while my own observations are consistent with that claim, this study cannot establish with certainty that it was the cultural specificity of gimbap that produced these conditions rather than the shared food activity itself. A comparative design using culturally neutral food activities alongside culturally relevant ones would be necessary to isolate that effect, and I encourage future researchers to take up that question.

Conclusion: What a Nourishing Campus Looks Like

This dissertation began with a question: what does it mean for students to enter a campus food environment that does not recognize them? The Korean American undergraduates at Uri University answered that question with a precision that no survey instrument had yet invited them to express. It means eating food that keeps you alive but does not make you feel at home. It means building elaborate navigational strategies to find, off-campus and out of your budget, the foods your institution was contractually obligated to provide but culturally unprepared to provide. It means watching the dining hall serve a dish labeled Korean stew and feeling, briefly, seen, and then tasting it and feeling, more thoroughly, unseen. It means deciding, consistently and without being explicitly told to, that the expectation of cultural recognition is not one you are entitled to hold (Schneider & Ingram, 2005; Goodwin, 2010; Poon et al., 2016).

The gimbap chats demonstrated what a culturally nourishing food environment, at even the most modest scale, can produce. Three hours. Seaweed and rice. Students who had not previously known each other left with connections, with food, and with the experience of spending time in a campus space that saw them, an experience apparently rare enough to

prompt genuine surprise. Uri University's own campus wellness program's "cultural snack initiative" was warmly received by students, and workshops designed to encourage students to prepare their own culturally familiar foods pointed toward what intentional institutional investment in this domain can look like. That these efforts are meaningful to students when they appear is itself evidence that the appetite is there, on both sides. What I argue in this dissertation is that these initiatives deserve to be understood as belonging interventions rather than only wellness programming or consumer amenities, and that the framework exists to support institutions in making that case systematically rather than sporadically.

Through this study, I am not arguing for a campus built around Korean food, nor for a campus that attempts to represent the cuisine of every student it enrolls. I am arguing that campus food environments are a meaningful and currently underexamined site of cultural belonging, and that attending to them has the potential to reach students whose needs institutional policies have not yet captured. The students in this study were not, for the most part, making demands. Many had internalized the expectation that their cultural food needs fell outside the scope of what a university was responsible for providing, and that internalization meant their dissatisfaction was invisible to the institution producing it. This pattern of self-silencing among Asian Americans when faced with discrimination has been documented across multiple contexts, with research showing that Asian Americans often choose silence as a negotiation strategy when confronting discriminatory treatment, viewing direct confrontation as potentially harmful to relationships and preferring to maintain harmony (Jun, 2012). Additionally, research has documented widespread underreporting of bias incidents and hate crimes among minoritized communities, with victims often choosing not to report experiences of bias to authorities due to various structural and cultural barriers

(Center for Public Integrity, 2018). Institutions that rely on student advocacy to identify unmet needs will systematically miss the students most affected by internalized deservingness. Reconsidering the campus food environment as a domain of cultural engagement rather than nutritional provision offers one way to close that gap, surfacing needs that existing belonging frameworks and assessment tools have not been designed to see. The students in this study deserved to have those needs considered. So do the students whose institutions have not yet thought to ask.

When I called my mother to ask how to make gimbap for the research sessions, she offered a piece of guidance that I have carried with me through the writing of this dissertation. "요리는 정성 이 중요해," she said. "내가 사랑하는 가족을 위해서 맛있게 해야지 생각하면서. 하나라도 허투르게 안하고 하는거. 귀찮아서 한번에 다 넣고 끓이는 아니라. 마음을 담아서. 성의를 다해서 만들어 야지 맛도 있는거야."

Doing my best to translate accurately, this roughly translates to, "When cooking, *jeongsong* (정성: sincerity, care, wholehearted effort) *is important. Not doing anything carelessly, but cooking while keeping in mind that you're making this for the family you love. Not just throwing everything into the same pot and boiling it because that's the easiest, but doing it with jeongsong. That's what makes it taste good.*" This is how I have tried to approach both the research and the writing of this dissertation. The students who shared their experiences with me, who made gimbap alongside me, who named heogijim (허기짐) for the first time in a research context, engaged with me and trusted me with their stories. It is the least I can do to also transcribe, analyze, interpret, and discuss their words with 정성 (jeongseong), to cook up this dissertation with sincere care and whole-hearted effort as well.

These students came to a campus that could not feed them fully; the hope is that this work will at least make sure they are not forgotten at the table.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Individual Student Interviews

Student's chosen name for study: _____

Opening prompt: Thank you for participating in this study. The following questions are designed to learn about your experiences with food and dining options at [Uri University]. Please feel free to ask me to repeat or rephrase any questions.

First, as I mentioned in the email, I would like to ask if you have a pseudonym that you want to use in the study. The pseudonym is to protect your privacy, and I ask if you would like you to choose own because I value your opinion and your agency in this process as much as possible. So, do you have a pseudonym you would like to use? Great. Thank you. Before we begin the conversation, would it be okay if I turn on the audio recorder on my phone to make sure I capture your responses accurately?

Background Questions:

1. Tell me about where you grew up.
 - Who did you live with?
 - What language(s) did you speak? With whom?
 - Which language do you feel most comfortable talking to your parents in?Your siblings?
 - Follow-up: hometown zip code? Major?
2. What kind of foods did you eat growing up?

- How involved were you in choosing what to eat/making food?
3. What was your high school like?
- What was the density of Korean American student population like?
 - What kinds of food were offered at your high school?
4. In the pre-interview survey, you responded that you identify as Korean-American.
- What does it mean for you to say that you're Korean American?
- What does it mean for you to say you are 1st/1.5/2nd generation?

Experiences with Campus Dining:

5. What are your overall thoughts about the food options available on campus?
6. How often do you eat at the dining halls? What do you typically eat there?
- What's good?
 - What don't you like?
7. Could you tell me about your typical daily routine when it comes to eating food at [UU]?
- Could you tell me about what you ate yesterday?
8. What kinds of food or specific dishes would you like to see offered on campus?
- Why?

Cultural Food and Sense of Belonging:

9. How frequently do you eat Korean food when you are [Uri University] (without going home?)

- How does the frequency of eating Korean food compare to when you lived at home?
10. Where do you get Korean food when you're at [Uri University]?
- How did you find out about --?
 - What are your general impressions of Korean food from --?
 - (If student doesn't have access to Korean food at [Uri University]) How do you feel about that? What do you do if you want to eat Korean food?
11. How important is it to you that the campus dining services offer food that reflects your cultural background?
12. How do you think the availability of Korean food compare to the availability of food from other cultural groups?
- To what do you attribute the difference in the availability of food from different cultures?
13. Can you tell me about a time when food made you feel more included or excluded as a member of this campus?
14. How does eating on campus affect your sense of belonging at [Uri University]?

Cultural Representation and Inclusivity:

15. Have you noticed any efforts by the university to offer food that reflects the diversity of students, including those with cultural or dietary needs? If so, what do you think of these efforts?
- How do you feel about the potential for creating more culturally inclusive spaces for food on campus?

16. If you had the opportunity, what changes would you suggest for campus food offerings that could better represent your culture and make you feel more at home?

Closing Questions:

17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with food on campus or your sense of belonging at [Uri University]?

Closing Prompt: Thank you for sharing your experiences with me today! For the next step, I would like to invite you to participate in the second part of this study: the gimbap chat. This will be a group gathering where I will prepare ingredients for gimbap, the traditional Korean rice roll, so that we can roll up some gimbap and eat it together while reflecting on food, belonging, and your experiences at [Uri University]. It will be a relaxed, communal setting where you can continue sharing your thoughts and engage in meaningful conversation with other Korean American students. Would you be interested in participating in this follow-up activity?

- If yes, gather student's schedule/availability information:

Appendix B: Gimbap Chat Protocol

Goal: Foster an open conversational space where students can reflect on their food experiences and sense of belonging at [Uri University], all while preparing and enjoying gimbap together.

One week before chat: confirm location

- Confirm the location and any usage rules with Facilities

One day before chat: Remind Participants

- Email Title: Gimbap Chat Tomorrow, MM/DD, at --!
- Email template:

Hi everyone!

This is a reminder that your gimbap chat is tomorrow, MM/DD at, --!The location of the chat is at the --, click here for link to the location on Google Maps.

If there's been a change in your availability or if you have any questions, please feel free to reach out by responding to this email or by sending me a text at 000-000-0000.

See you tomorrow!

Dee Dee Hong | 홍담희 | (she/her/hers)

Day of Chat :

Prepare Ingredients for Gimbap

- Before the chat begins, prepare all necessary ingredients for making gimbap according to recipe: aim to have everything set up in room at least 15 minutes before students are scheduled to arrive
- Reminder: bring name tags, consent forms, food-grade gloves, utensils, zip-lock bags
Reminders for participants before beginning chat
- Pseudonyms: Remind participants that they are free to continue using their pseudonyms for the study. If they prefer, they may choose to use their real names during this conversation, and you will be sure to record them under their chosen pseudonym in the transcripts. Ensure them that all files will be kept secure.
- Safe Space: Emphasize that this is a safe and respectful space. Encourage participants to share openly, and remind them to listen with care to each other's stories. All participants are encouraged to speak freely and to ask questions that contribute to a deeper understanding of one another's experiences.

Prompts if needed, for researcher:

Start the group conversation by introducing the group to the activity. Share my personal experience with gimbap.

- Possible story from me: how gimbap for me is a symbol of my mom's labor of love
- What are some food practices or foods in general that remind you of home?
- How do food experiences shape your identity and connection to others?

- What do you think it'll be like if the food that's available to you at school was more similar to the food you ate at home?
- Can you recall a time when food made a positive impact on your mental health or emotional well-being?
 - Can you recall a time when food made a negative impact on your mental health or emotional well-being?
- Do you feel at home here at [Uri University]?
- Are there any other stories about food and school that you want to share?

Reminders for: Reflection and Closing

Once everyone has finished making and eating the gimbap, guide a group reflection session.

- How did sharing a Korean meal together here on campus feel for you?
- Do you think your well-being here would be different if these types of activities were offered frequently?
- What insights did you gain about your own experiences with food and community?

Thank the participants. Let them know there will be a post-survey about experience in a few days.

One week later

- Send post-chat survey:

1. Name used during chat
2. What are your preferred pronouns
3. Major
4. Are you involved in any Korean or Korean American student organizations at [Uri University]?
5. How would you describe your experience of making and eating gimbap together during the gimbap chat?
6. Did participating in the gimbap chat affect how connected or at home you feel on campus? If so, how? If not, why not?
7. What would having more opportunities to cook and eat Korean food with other students mean to you?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the gimbap chat or in this study?

Appendix C: Photos of Food Prepared During Gimbap Chat Sessions

Photos 1 and 2: Spread of prepared ingredients for gimbap, prepared according to Mama Hong's gimbap recipe (Appendix D)



Photo 3: Example of how a gimbap looks before it is rolled up.



Photo 4: Gimbap after they have been rolled up and cut



Photo 5: Gimbap Chat materials secured in a closed plastic bin, which remained mostly stain-free despite a pot of kimchi stew (김치찌개) spilling onto the floor nearby.



Appendix D: Mama Hong's Gimbap Recipe

Korean Version

기본 재료

- 밥
- 쌀
- 참기름
- 소금
- 김
- 물 또는 참기름 (마무리용)

속재료

- 단무지
- 맛살
- 오징어
- 참치 마요, 햄, 불고기 같은 단백질
- 계란 지단
- 오이 또는 시금치 (시금치 사용 시)
- 소금
- 참기름 (한국 참기름)

만드는 법

1. 밥 짓기

밥은 질지 않게 고슬고슬하게 짓는다. 밥이 아직 뜨거울 때 참기름과 소금을 넣고 고루 섞는다. 간은 세지 않게, 고소하게 맞춘다. 넓게 펴서 한 김 식혀 둔다.

2. 속재료 준비

단무지, 맛살, 오징어, 햄은 길쭉하게 썬다. 오이는 길게 채 썬다. 오이 대신 시금치를 넣을 경우에는 살짝 데친 뒤 찬물에 헹구고 물기를 꼭 짰 후, 소금과 참기름을 넣고 조물조물 무친다. 모든 속재료는 물기가 많지 않게 준비한다. 재료는 이왕이면 알록달록 여러 색인것이 좋다.

3. 김밥 말기

김은 꺼칠한 면이 위로 오게 놓는다. 식혀 둔 밥을 김 위에 얇게 펴는데, 김의 약 90% 정도만 덮고 위쪽은 조금 비워 둔다. 준비한 속재료를 가운데에 가지런히 올린다.

아래에서부터 단단하게 말아 준다. 마지막 밥이 없는 부분에는 물이나 참기름을 살짝 묻혀 붙인다.

4. 썰기

먹기 좋은 크기로 썰어 바로 낸다. 칼에 참기름을 살짝 묻혀 썰면 잘 붙지 않는다

Translated Version

Basic Ingredients

- Cooked white sticky rice
- Rice (short-grain white rice)
- Sesame oil
- Salt
- Roasted seaweed sheets (gim / nori)
- Water or sesame oil (for sealing)

Filling Ingredients

- Danmuji (yellow pickled radish)
 - Imitation crab sticks
 - Fish cake
 - Protein, such as ham, canned tuna with mayonnaise, or bulgogi
 - Thin strips of egg omelette
 - Cucumber or spinach
- (If using spinach)
- Salt
 - Sesame oil (from the Korean store)

Instructions

1. Cook the Rice

Cook the rice so it is fluffy and not mushy. While the rice is still hot, add sesame oil and salt and mix evenly. Season lightly so it tastes nutty rather than salty. Spread it out and let it cool before using.

2. Prepare the Fillings

Cut the danmuji, imitation crab, fish cake, and ham into long strips. Julienne the cucumber into long thin pieces. If using spinach instead of cucumber, briefly blanch it, rinse in cold water, and squeeze out all the moisture. Then season it with salt and sesame oil, gently mixing by hand.

Make sure all the fillings are not too wet. It is best if the ingredients are colorful and varied.

3. Roll the Gimbap

Place the seaweed sheet with the rough side facing up. Spread a thin layer of cooled rice over about 90% of the seaweed, leaving a small portion at the top uncovered. Arrange the prepared fillings neatly across the center.

Roll tightly from the bottom. Lightly brush the uncovered edge with water or sesame oil to seal the wrap.

4. Slice

Cut into bite-sized pieces and serve immediately. Lightly brushing the knife with sesame oil will help prevent sticking.