Chapter 6
International Students’ Eating Habits and Food Practices in Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have studied international students’ adjustment issues using different approaches and methods over several years. This varying landscape suggested a different understanding about the role of dietary acculturation on international student’s movements. International students’ mobility affects their dietary habits, food choices, and physical behavior. As international students move from one country to another, they may adopt to the culture of their host country. This adoption may affect their food practices and choices, and can lead to changes in students eating behaviors. The aim of this chapter is to provide a research context and draw out documented issues such as: impact of dietary acculturation on international students, changes in dietary habits and food practices following temporal migration, and health consequences due to the dietary acculturation. This chapter also represents varying qualitative and quantitative perspectives on the international students’ eating experiences in colleges and universities, and discusses approaches to moderate the negative impact of dietary acculturation on international students.

INTRODUCTION

As international students move from one country to another, they may adopt and assimilate to the customs and culture of their hosts. This adoption may affect their food availability and choices and can lead to changes in their eating practices (Edwards, Hartwell, & Brown, 2010). International students interact daily with other students from different backgrounds and cultures, and due to the multicultural nature of the higher education institute’s environment, students’ attitudes and beliefs may interact or contend with their originally acquired values (Perez-Cueto, Verbeke, Lachat, & Remaut-De Winter, 2009). There has been an increase in studies concerning the nutrition adoption and its health impact on international students.

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students in the western countries such as U.S., U.K., and Canada (Alakaam & Mayfield-Johnson, 2015; Almohanna, Barbeau, Conforti, & Eigel, 2015); knowledge of food practices and preferences, as well as dietary habits of international students from various ethnic groups, is necessary in order to provide effective nutrition education and care to an increasingly diverse population (Brittin & Obeidat, 2011; Verbik & Lasanowski – Hobsons, 2007). The purpose of this chapter is to explore dietary intake changes of international students, to provide information of the roles of the acculturation on food intake among international students, and to examine the factors that contribute to dietary acculturation. This chapter also discusses the factors that influence food practices and health impact of dietary acculturation among international students. Additionally, the perspective of current studies in U.S. about international students’ eating habits and approaches to moderate the negative impact of dietary acculturation on international students are also discussed in this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The nature of food habits are influenced by many factors such as socioeconomic status, food access, food availability, and lack of time, these factors have an effect on food choices and may lead to an increase or decrease in the consumption of specific types of food, thus altering individual’s eating behaviors (Brittin & Obeidat, 2011; Jabber, Brown, Hammad, Zhu, & Herman, 2003). However, beyond these physical and economic determinants, food habits are essentially cultural (Kittler & Sucher, 2004). Some cultures have values and restrictions concerning what foods are acceptable in the diet and what ways are applicable to prepare and cook the food (Booth et al., 2001).

The cultural background and orientation, in conjunction with personal characteristics, eventually determine an individual’s dietary habits (Kittler & Sucher, 2004). One important attribute of culture is that culture is learned rather than biologically determined (Sanjur, 1995, p. 38). Cultural behavior is the product of interaction among individuals, and it changes at different rates over time. Eating habits are an example of the dynamic cultural behaviors which constantly change. The change in eating habits can be observed at multiple levels and could impact types of food consumption and, therefore, health (Jabber et al., 2003; Sanjur, 1995, p. 38). Transition to a new culture and adoption of the host culture have been associated with various effects on individual’s behaviors, eating habits, food choices, and health outcomes especially during the first few months of the transition (Edwards et al., 2012; Lara, Gamboa, Kahramanian, Morales, & Bautista, 2005), which can result in a decrease in diet quality, excessive weight gain, and an increased risk for chronic diseases (Alakaam, 2012; Almohanna et al., 2015; Pan, Dixon, Himburg, & Huffman, 1999). The process of adopting beliefs and values of the host culture is known as acculturation and is perhaps most visible among people who have recently relocated, such as international students, or immigrated, such as refugees, to a new country (Berry, 1997; Lara et al., 2005).

NUTRITION TRANSITION AND DIETARY ACCULTURATION

Each individual’s cultural experience consists of beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape individual’s practices which include eating habits, food choices, and meal patterns (Kittler & Sucher, 2004). Place of birth, gender, language, religion, age, ethnicity, and social status are examples of the characteristics that shape the culture and result in a particular lifestyle as well as play an essential role in people’s
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