Butter Chicken, Pho, and a Turkey Sandwich: A Qualitative Study of Student Identity Development in Campus Dining Spaces

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how campus dining influences student identity development, engagement, and validation at a large public urban university in the southeastern United States. Grounded in Astin's Involvement Theory, Rendón's Validation Theory, and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity and drawing on interviews with ten undergraduate students, the study identified three key themes: dining halls as spaces of validation, habit-forming environments, and crucibles for identity development. Students described how consistent access to dining spaces supported academic routines, social connections, and cultural affirmation. Findings suggest that campus dining plays a critical role in shaping students' sense of belonging and identity, particularly through culturally relevant food offerings, staff interactions, and institutional policies. The study highlights the importance of viewing auxiliary services as developmental spaces. Recommendations are provided for university leaders to enhance dining services as sites of student engagement and identity formation. This work contributes to filling a gap in student affairs literature by centering dining as a meaningful context for student development.

Keywords: auxiliary services quality, student success, student engagement

Introduction

On any given day at most universities, the campus dining hall is a bustling hub of activity, especially during the busy meal periods of lunch, dinner, and even late night for those institutions that offer this service. Students hurriedly enter the facility after swiping their identification card, backpack on, and then walk around scouring the different food stations to put together their meal. Sometimes they rush straight to the pizza station or grill, ready for some comfort food before hunkering down at their table or in their booth to study, read, stream a video, or decompress with friends. Sometimes they crave particular entrees, such as stir fry, dal, butter chicken, or pho. Sometimes, they just want a bowl of cereal and a place to finish homework with friends before heading to their next class.

As all this activity is swirling around, it is important to understand how students are experiencing, engaging with, and processing the curated dining experiences provided

by the university. The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to understand the experiences of students in campus dining, using narratives provided by students during interviews. In this study, researchers sought to understand how campus dining impacts the overall experience of collegiate students, including how the campus dining program supports or does not support student academic, social, and identity development. The goal was to understand more about this to provide administrators with ways to enhance campus dining to provide an improved college experience that supports overall student identity and academic development.

Dining services in a college and university environment is a large enterprise, according to Lewis (2019). Many institutions outsource this program, and there are three major companies in the higher education food service space (Anderson, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, food service sales on college and university campuses exceeded $18 billion (Lewis, 2019). With many colleges and universities outsourcing their food service operations and relying on dining income to fund aspects of the university, one cannot help but wonder about the attention focused on student development within the campus dining spaces.

This study is an exploratory, qualitative case study at one public urban university in southeastern United States. The goals of this study were to explore potential blind spots in student development and student identity research involving campus dining services and students' interactions with it. To date empirical studies of university dining programs have focused on nutrition, food insecurity, sustainability, and satisfaction with the campus dining program.

The areas of dining and connections with student engagement have been understudied; however, in an article by Jerrat et al. (2019) it was noted that auxiliary services areas such as campus dining halls where student swipe card data are collected could be a promising area of study to understand the impact of student connectedness on student success outcomes. Data from these areas on student usage or non-usage of these services with other students could also offer advance predictors of student retention (Jerrat et al., 2019). There has been limited empirical study on campus dining using student development theories as a lens for review.

The central research question for this study, was what are the perceptions of collegiate students on the influence of campus dining on the overall student experience? The remainder of this paper will present the literature review, study methods, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

The following sections will present the literature reviewed for this study. This section will also present an overview of the theories that provide the guiding framework for the development of study methods and evaluation of student narratives. Additionally, this section will present gaps in the current literature and study limitations.

Overview of studies on dining in a university setting

Empirical studies of university dining programs have focused on nutrition, food insecurities, sustainability, and satisfaction. The areas of dining and connections with student engagement have been understudied; however, a study by Jerrat et al. (2019) noted that auxiliary services areas such as campus dining halls where student swipe card data are collected could be a promising area of study to understand the social impacts of usage of these services on student retention. The following sections will highlight the current research in campus nutrition, food insecurities on campus, sustainability, and satisfaction related to campus dining.

Nutrition and campus dining

Brown, Dresen and Eggett (2005) found participation in a university meal plan provided small nutritional benefits to student participants by providing access to more servings from fruit, vegetable, and meat food groups. In their study, Bevet, Niles, and Pope (2018) found a student's stated preference for healthy foods did not impact actual food choices. Driskell et al., (2008) found higher percentages of female students than male students used nutritional labels at a study at one institution. Researchers have noted mixed results from students when providing nutritional information at the point of food selection or purchase. Cioffi, Levitsky, Pacanowski, and Bertz (2015) noted there was a small but significant impact on student decision-making about food purchases. Christoph, Ellison, and Meador (2016) noted that while many students were aware that nutritional labels were provided at the stations, only a small percentage of students actually used the labels to make food choices.

Student food insecurity and campus dining

Researchers have used campus dining halls as a setting to understand more about campus food insecurity. In their study on food insecurity and meal plan usage, Van Woerden et al. (2019) found students who reported being food insecure still had unused meals on their unlimited meal plans and that students on unlimited meal plans were less likely to report being food insecure (Van Woerden et al., 2019). In their study, Calvez et al., (2016) found some areas of a campus may be better served than others in terms of student access to food choices that are perceived by students as affordable, nutritional, and fresh. They highlight the importance of campus geography in terms of providing additional context to food insecurity of college students (Calvez et al., 2016).

Sustainability and campus dining

There have been several studies examining sustainability using campus dining as a setting. Yoon & Lim, (2023) found student valued campus dining sustainability initiatives included reducing food waste in the dining halls, donating food that had not been served in the dining hall, composting initiatives, and reducing usage of disposable utensils and plates. Zhang and Kwon (2022) conducted a quasi-experimental study to

understand the impact of implementing voluntary trayless dining in a university cafeteria and found that while this practice reduced food consumption by campus diners it did not reduce food waste. This policy also contributed to student dissatisfaction with the dining program as students felt inconvenienced (Zhang & Kwon, 2022).

Campus dining satisfaction studies

Understanding dining satisfaction from the student perspective has also been a subject of study. Mukucha et al., (2022) found the most important components of student satisfaction for all students in their study were food quality in conjunction with the dining hall environment and dining staff service. Raihen et al., (2023) noted in their study on predictors of student satisfaction in campus dining at universities that food quality, food variety, and student perception of cost were predictors of student satisfaction with campus dining and student encounters with dining staff were not a significant predictor of student satisfaction with dining.

Guiding Framework

Three student development theories were quilted together to form the study's guiding framework – Astin's Involvement Theory, Rendon's Validation Theory, and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity. Importantly, two of the theories selected reflect the environment that a college and university create for students and one theory selected presents what is happening to student identity as the student experiences this created environment. Since the goal of quilting together theories relies on explaining them first independently and then illustrating how they work together to create a whole, this section will present each theory on its own and then quilt them together as a complete guiding framework. Astin (1984) defined involvement as the amount of energy – both physical and psychological – that a student invests in academic experience. Involvement in the academic environment focuses on the observable student behaviors in response to the academic environment, such as participation in university activities. Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory does not focus on what develops in the student, but how the environment – including policies, procedures, and practices - increases or decreases student involvement on campus, and influence student outcomes. In Involvement Theory, Astin developed the Inputs–Environment–Output (I–E–O) model, which has been used by researchers to identify the impact of participation in a wide range of on-campus academic and social activities on several student success outcomes (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

There are five components to Validation Theory (Rendon Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The first component is about positive outreach with the student, which can occur in an academic setting or outside the classroom (Rendon Linares & Muñoz, 2011). This positive contact by an adult connected with the institution helps the student to believe in their abilities to succeed and to be motivated to continue, which is the second component

(Rendon Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Importantly, this contact should happen earlier in the student's academic career to support their success. Positive contact with a campus adult reinforces the student's confidence and feeling of belonging, and the student begins to become involved on campus (Rendon Linares & Muñoz, 2011). The fourth component is that this validation can happen in the classroom or elsewhere on the campus, and that it needs to be consistent, as validation is not an end but a constant journey for the student throughout their academic experience, which is the fifth component (Rendon Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity also provided a guiding framework for this study to explain the student experience and engagement with campus dining. In this theory, the interactive components of a student's experience, the context, are filtered through a meaning-making filter and affect the student's self-perceptions of their multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Sometimes, the individual can see connections across their multiple identity dimensions and sometimes these are viewed as independent identity dimensions (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). This theory is important because it provides the ability to explain the fluidity of student identity, which largely depends on the unique circumstances and how the student is making meaning in one moment and this can change given a change in circumstance (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). This theory also provided a way to explain the holistic components of each student and their multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007).

Quilting these theories together provides a lens to see how the student is responding in the curated campus dining environment, how the institution is validating students in campus dining, and the ways in which the student is filtering this experience to shape the development of their multiple identities. Astin's Involvement Theory provides a framework for understanding whether a student's dining experiences encourage further involvement with the campus. Through Validation Theory, the campus dining experience can be examined for its role in validating or invalidating students and shaping their identities. Abes, Jones, and McEwen's Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity provides a lens to explore how students engage with the campus dining experience and the meaning making that happens as the experience is filtered through their multiple identities.

Gaps in the Literature

Current research on campus dining has primarily focused on business and operational aspects, such as student satisfaction, sustainability, and nutrition. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the role of campus dining in student development. This suggests a potential blind spot for student affairs practitioners and scholars in understanding how these spaces contribute to student growth and identity formation. By exploring the developmental experiences that occur within campus dining environments, researchers and practitioners may gain a deeper appreciation for their significance in fostering holistic student development.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this study include that this is a qualitative case study, so findings may be generalizable only to this institution.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the experiences of students in campus dining, using narratives provided by students during interviews. The researchers sought to understand how campus dining impacts the overall experience of collegiate students, This section presents the methods used for this qualitative case study on the impact of campus dining on student development and identity. The study design utilized student narratives as its primary data source. The following sections will present the study setting and participants, research design, and data analysis procedures used.

Study Setting and Participants

The study setting was an urban commuter institution in the southwestern United States identified for this study as Urban Institution (UI). For the purpose of anonymity, all participants and locations were assigned pseudonyms. At UI, there are about 8,000 students who live in residence halls and about 4,500 students who live in residence halls requiring a mandatory meal plan. Two major dining halls serve this population, Martin Dining Hall and Woodbridge Dining Hall. During the time of this study, Woodbridge Dining was open twenty-four hours per day-seven days a week (24/7) and Martin Dining Hall was open Sunday-Fridays. Martin Dining Hall had previously been the location where students could dine 24/7, but the building's age necessitated a transition of late-night dining to Woodbridge Dining Hall. Additionally, there is a food hall on campus with six food stations located near the classroom buildings and a student union building with five food stations. There are four additional restaurants located on campus in an academic building, the recreation center, and attached to campus parking structures.

Participants were undergraduate students who had completed auxiliary services surveys in the past year and who had indicated their interest in participating in interviews. Ten (10) students participated in the interviews. Four students identified as freshman; four identified as sophomores: one student identified as junior; and one student identified as senior. Most students interviewed were either currently living on campus or had lived on campus previously. All students interviewed had experience with the required mandatory meal plan and its rules, in this case the unlimited plan that provides students unlimited meals during the week, three meal exchanges that can be used in the campus retail locations, and an amount of declining balance, which can be used in campus retail or convenience stores.

Interview Protocol and Analysis

The interviews lasted for one hour in length. In the interviews, students were given prompts and questions such as, "Describe the most positive experience you have

had as a student with campus dining" and how have your experiences with campus dining impacted your academic success? A complete list of questions used in the interview is provided as Appendix A. Additional follow-up questions were asked as needed for clarity, to explore concepts raised by students in the interviews, and to verify student answers.

Following the interview, transcripts of each of the interviews were completed, and researchers reviewed the transcripts to code and identify themes that emerged. Researchers immersed themselves in the student narratives, reading and re-reading student comments and allowed themes to emerge from the students' own voices. The two researchers coded and identified themes independently and then compared themes. Researchers conducted basic thematic analysis across these surveys using open and thematic coding as described by Saldaña (2016) to identify common themes. As their lens to examine student narratives to identify themes that emerged, researchers used the quilted guiding framework of Astin's Involvement Theory, Rendon's Validation Theory, and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.

Results

There were three distinct themes that emerged in this study where dining was noted by students as a: a) space of validation, b) habit-creating environment, and c) crucible for identity development. . The following sections will describe and share student perspectives connected with these three themes.

Theme 1: Space of Validation

In their narratives, students described experiences with the dining program that were validating and invalidating to their student experience and how they processed these experiences. Rendon's Validation theory describes specific adult contact with students as being the action that can validate or invalidate student experience. In most instances in campus dining, the experience of validation or invalidation for students was through actions or behaviors within the dining experience, such as rules for use of meal plan, signage in the dining halls, and the ways dining staff treated students.

As an example of this, there was a rich discussion among students in one of the student interviews about consistency in food offerings and hours of operation, specifically during finals between Sara, a sophomore student; Ashley, a sophomore student; Emily, a junior student; and Flower, a senior student.

Flower noted that on campus dining halls are a center of student interaction, a hub that validates the student experience and encourages more student involvement. In the same comment, Flower noted this makes it even more critical for consistency in hours of operation during critical academic periods for students, such as final exams, noting: *"The dining halls help a lot with campus interaction, and food is the center of interaction with cultures. With exams and their friends, it's more important that it doesn't lack at critical times."*

Ashley added to this discussion noting the importance of having many options and being aware of their hours of operation and the critical nature of consistency in food offerings during peak academic periods: "*I would say that in terms of convenience, it's good to know about the dining places on campus. It's important to keep track of the dining places. I don't think the food is good during finals.*"

Beyond consistent hours of operation, students emphasized that clear labeling of entrees – especially for dietary restrictions and nutritional information – can significantly impact whether their dining experience feels validating or invalidatin. Lola, a freshman commented about her experience with understanding about whether entrees in the dining hall were halal certified was particularly challenging, especially if an employee was not near the station, given that many of the stations are self-service:

> *And now there are so many like like at Martin, there are more self-service stations where there's not always a person attending there. So you might have to stand around for a while waiting for someone. I think it would be a lot more convenient to like be able to check the menu before going through dining hall and being able to know what, what my options are before going in and whether or not it's certified or not.*

Flower shared a moment of invalidation tied to limited dining options and dietary restrictions:

> *My other big thing, and it happened to me recently, everything was closed except Melt Lab, but I couldn't use it because I can't have dairy sometimes. In my head, I wanted a turkey sandwich and there wasn't anything that fit under Melt Lab.*

As a counterpoint, Abigail a sophomore nutrition major, found the dining halls and their nutrition labeling of nutrition to be validating to her own student experience:

> *I think it's really good. There's always a good variety of different kinds of food. You don't just have pork all the time or beef all the time. They have chicken and a lot of fish, which is really good for diversity in your diet. Everything is labeled really clearly.*

Students also mentioned the importance of employees in the dining hall as validating to the student experience. Hannah, a freshman student noted:

> *Yeah, one time I was walking to the dining hall and a group of the morning workers were leaving their shift. I bumped into them and they all said hi to me. It was so sweet because they remembered me from going to that station every morning. I still say hi to them when I see them. It was nice seeing them after winter break again.*

Ashley also noted she had seen a recent change in the types of employees that were hired and that the campus dining hall was hiring more graduate students, which she found easier to connect with than employees who were not students, by noting:

> *I think usually it is a regular adult that they hire, but this time they have grad students working, and I think that seeing another student and having something to talk about, like finals, was a lot more relatable in terms of customer service.*

Students also noted restrictive policies that negatively influenced their student experience. A commonly mentioned rule was the rule preventing meal exchanges before a certain time. Emily commented:

> *Grabbing a bite to eat is hard with the meal exchange options after 2 p.m. I find that meal exchange options are lacking in nutrients; it feels like fast food. It drags me down later in the day or I go without food until I can get something. If I have a 4 p.m. class and have been out and about since the morning, sometimes my attention will waver because I'm thinking about food. It can be a little distracting at times.*

Theme 2: Habit Creating Environment

Students often mentioned the dining hall as one of the first on-campus locations where they developed habits that supported their academic success and social identity. Students used words like, "habit," "routine," "every day," and "usually" when describing how participating in dining contributed to their involvement on campus. Students noted the consistency of knowing that the dining hall was always available contributed to them using these facilities as a place to connect and complete homework. Since the dining hall is a place of consistent on-campus engagement, it was also more noticeable to students when the hours changed, and the facility was not open. Students also pointed out specific programming geared toward first-year students and cultural events in the dining halls provided them with an event to attend with friends, further solidifying these as places where involvement happens.

Abigail, a sophomore, commented about how the routine of going to the dining hall began her freshman year and continued as she became more involved in other campus activities,

> *My freshman year, a big thing was always going to the dining hall with my roommate. That was kind of our everyday routine. Now that I'm in more clubs, I go there after events or meetings. It's been really enjoyable just running into my friends there.*

Hannah, a freshman student echoed that as a new student, the dining hall's convenience provided an activity for her and for her friends:

> *I think it definitely has allowed for more socializing. Every time we don't know what to do, we usually just go get food. Martin is the closest to me, so it's a good environment. Since it's always good food, we usually just go in there and get something. It's a good little social thing. We also go to one of the dining options on campus. It's a good environment, the vibe is fun and nice, and the food is good. That's also helped us have something to do and socialize.*

Emily, commented on the reliable, cultural and first-year specific programming and its importance:

> *For me, it helped that they do cultural specialties once per month. During my freshman year, they promoted the first-year eats, and we could get a group of people and make it a club outing. We would go to the events and did the Crumbl pop-up all together.*

For Mark, a freshman, dining hall spaces provided a convenient place to complete homework and this became a routine that supported his academic involvement:

> *My friend and I actually made it a little habit to work on our geology homework in Martin right after we um like around the time we're done with class because it's a good place to get breakfast and it's a it's quiet enough where we can do our homework or study for the tests that would come up later that week. So Martin is a really good place for me, for a student involvement.*

John, a sophomore student, echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that the consistent dining hours created a convenient ritual-like place for him to study with friends. He appreciated knowing exactly when the dining hall was open and having a reliable comfort food option. This consistency keeps John and his friends returning – knowing they always have a place they belong on campus. In fact, they decided one day to see how long they could spend continuously in the dining hall studying for a calculus exam in his comment:

> *This goes back to last year when my friends and I were studying for a calculus exam. We spent about 8 hours in there before the exam – studying at first, then hanging out to see how long we could stay – sometimes up to 9 hours.*

In terms of the importance of the dining hall in supporting student academic and social identity in developing and growing these habits from the beginning of a student's first year, this was evident in multiple student narratives. For students, an awareness of how important the dining hall would be to their involvement on campus was almost instinctive. Take for example the narrative of Abigail, who felt compelled to see the dining hall on her campus tour before she could commit to attending the institution as a student and now as a student, this place still has a high level of importance for her:

I spend most of my time at the dining halls because I live on campus, so I have the meal plan. I really enjoyed it. That was one of the things that pushed me to go to UI when I came on my tour. I snuck into the dining hall, and when I saw it, I was like, wow.

Throughout their academic career, in student narratives the importance of the dining hall as a connector of academic and social involvement continues. For example, describing how noticeable it is to students when the dining hall is not available during certain times of the year, such as the end of the semester, the impact is so noticeable that some of the students interviewed, they noted that the university should "text blast" students when hours of operation change during this time. Flower commented,

The big thing is accessibility. Is it open? The quality of the stuff there feels like they just want to get us out of there. I have to tough it out a week before I go home.

Theme 3: Crucible for Identity Development

Students described campus dining as having a significant role in the development of their cultural and global identities. For the most part, in these interviews, students described feelings about the dining program connected with the development of their cultural and global identities and to be more aware of the cultural identities of others. When the entrees in the dining halls were presented in ways that felt culturally affirming to the student and their cultural identity or the identities of others, the experience was very positively strong and reinforced the student's connection to the institution. This also provided these students with a way to present and share this identity with their friends. As an example, John commented,

I think the best experience was when they were celebrating Diwali at Woodbridge last year. My family is Indian, and it reminded me of home. It was good to be there with my friends and experience my culture with them. They had some dancers, which was pretty cool to see. They also had samosas – I really enjoyed that.

However, when the cultural entrees were not presented in a manner that felt culturally affirming to the student and their ethnic and cultural identity, the feeling described was very negative and this translated to a negative connection with the institution. Ashley's story illustrated this perspective

As for me, I go to the Asian Umami section. Asian food is really lacking. They put ingredients that don't belong, not super culturally aware. I mean, one time I had pho, and the noodles were wrong, the toppings didn't make sense, and it had kimchi, a Korean side dish. I was taken aback. I don't think that would have happened if there was a taco station. All the toppings we have there are appropriate. Urban Institution sees Asian food as a monolith. Hire more Asian chefs and people who have real input to make recipes on campus more edible.

The other component of identity presented by students was their appreciation of other cultures on campus and willingness to explore other cultures through food, and that this provided them with a positive connection with other students on campus. Stories about their experiences with cultural foods emerged as one of their most positive experiences with the dining hall. For example, Lola noted she had always wanted to try butter chicken, and one day when the dining hall had this on the menu she was able to try this entree, "I tried out butter chicken for the first time and that was pretty cool."

Sara also prioritized ethnic foods in her narrative and the opportunity to connect with other cultures

> *For me, I would say the most positive experience I had was last year when they had a couple of multicultural nights at Woodbridge where they had specifically ethnic foods for people who are vegetarian or vegan. I really enjoyed having those options and trying different cuisines from around the world. So, I thought that was my most positive experience.*

Discussion

The role of the campus dining hall and what this means for the university
In this study, student narratives illustrated that the campus dining hall is a place where students develop academic and social involvement habits, enact, and develop cultural and global identities. For students, the importance of the dining hall as this place of student academic and social involvement is instinctive, perhaps even before beginning their academic journey. Once students experience the dining hall, this place becomes a go-to for social and academic engagement and often is the springboard to more engagement on campus, propelling them to join campus clubs. This student insight into the importance of the campus dining hall in establishing early student academic and social habits provides additional confirmation for the work of Jerrat et al. (2019) who noted that using card swipe data from the campus dining hall to create measures of social connectedness can be a viable predictor of student retention. Even after students become more involved on campus, students speak about returning to the dining hall as a place to enhance and strengthen their connections with campus.

Recommendations for practice

The biggest takeaway from student narratives is that campus leadership should prioritize dining halls as a place where academic and social identities are developed and nurtured from the beginning of a student's academic career. Information should be presented at orientation and through other avenues about the importance of the dining hall as a place to connect socially and academically. Academic leaders should celebrate the dining hall as a place where, for many students, student engagement begins.

To foster this environment, universities should ensure validating practices of consistency in hours of operation, nutritional and dietary information, and that posted

menus match the entrees served at the station. When unexpected situations arise that have an impact on consistency, enhanced measures for communication are essential to help explain changes students. For example, planned changes in hours of operation during finals can be texted to students with meal plans. Additionally, communicating changes in menu offerings by having an associate at the station, explaining the menu to students and answering their questions or by adding creative signage at the station can be validating for students and their dining experience.

Dining staff can also conduct regular town halls during the semester with students on meal plans, explaining rules for services within the meal plan like meal exchanges. In these town hall settings, dining staff can answer questions and hear directly from students about their experiences. They can also be creative in developing opportunities to expand the menu items offered and adjust the hours to support students.
Institutions should also cultivate programming in the dining hall that provides new experiences for students, including ethnic and cultural programs, where students can experience new and different food offerings and learn about other cultures. They can work with faculty and student group subject matter experts to develop menu items and have faculty and students explain the importance of these menu offerings to the culture represented. These programs, when curated in an authentic way for students, provide validating student experiences and further solidify the dining hall as a place that nurtures and develops student identity development.

As part of efforts to curate and develop an experience that supports student identity development, the most important priority is that auxiliary leaders who oversee dining should spend time talking with students and experiencing the dining hall through a student's perspective. Auxiliary leaders should actively be in their service areas, especially on evenings and weekends, to see how students are utilizing and connecting with the dining hall. Auxiliary leaders should participate in the programming within their dining halls and provide feedback to their dining teams to enhance and improve service. Auxiliary leaders should also establish standard operating procedures to create more consistency, including procedures and communication strategies for changes in hours of operations and programming. Auxiliary leaders should also monitor these areas for consistency, such as monitoring the reliability of the presentation of nutrition and dietary information presented at each of the stations and online menus.

Recommendations for future studies

This study is a first step in exposing a blind spot in the student affairs literature – understanding the significance of auxiliary services areas such as campus dining on student development. Using student narratives, a key finding from this study was the importance of the campus dining hall in establishing key habits related to student academic and social involvement on campus. Importantly, student comments revealed that they experience validation and invalidation in the dining hall that affects their academic, social, cultural and global development.

Future work should focus on the types of campus dining programming and interventions that strengthen university efforts to enhance student validation and involvement on campus. Future work should begin to explore other key auxiliary services areas. Auxiliary services staff and their programs have significant contact with students and many of these service areas are within functional areas not connected with Student Affairs and have to date been understudied so their full impact on the student experience is unknown.

Conclusion

Studies on student involvement, validation, and identity development often happen in academic or student affairs settings. The campus dining hall, and other auxiliary services areas, are current campus blind spots, in which university leadership is unaware of the impactful nature of these services on student development. Through student narratives collected through this study, it is apparent that the dining hall is an important place for shaping student academic, social, cultural, and global identity development. Further, the ways in which a student feels validated or invalidated in their interactions with campus dining is a critical component of shaping their identity development. While pho, butter chicken, and a turkey sandwich may not seem like tools for identity development, in the minds of students who engage in campus dining hall services, these symbolize the university's care, validation, and support for their student growth and development.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

Describe your overall experiences with campus dining, including whether your experience is primarily in the residential dining commons or in retail restaurants.

Describe the most positive experience you have had as a student with campus dining.

How have your experiences with campus dining impacted your academic success?

How have your experiences with campus dining impacted your student involvement on campus?

Describe one opportunity for improvement for campus dining.

What additional information would you like to share about campus dining?